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BLESSED AMONG WOMEN

By
ARNOLD MICHAEL



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By

ARNOLD MICHAEL



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FOREWORD

I have twice read *Blessed Among Women*. The first reading was in manuscript. The second was in galley proof. This gave me the rare experience of finding the second reading more delightful than the first. Usually after a book has been read once most of the bloom is rubbed off by familiarity. But with this book the rule does not hold. I am looking forward to the third reading in book form, and I anticipate an even greater treat.

There is something unique and original in this story, both in treatment and material. It is a book rather difficult to classify, although the author is obviously a novelist. The book is a novel, and yet it reads like a composite biography of the world's greatest two women, the mother of God's Son and the mother of John the Baptist. These famous women are treated with extraordinary perception, delicate understanding and sympathy. The story has the sweep also of a great allegory, and the lingering power of a legend.

The author has done his work well, for it seems at times almost as though he were *written through*, so smoothly does the narrative flow.

The best thing about the book I can say is simply this, I wish I had written it.

The author has not been handicapped by any outworn creeds and sterile theological half-truths. He writes with a freedom that borders well-nigh on license at times, and this gives the reader a long breath of freshness after wading through the endless run of religious

books. For this is a religious book; but not a preachy, pious book. Arnold Michael has written with a genuinely spiritual dare, which few authors have the courage to attempt.

I wish for it a warm public reception. It deserves a wide circulation. I am quite sure that no reader will be disappointed. I believe that each reader will both want to keep the book and pass it on to a friend. It is that kind of a book. The kind people read and talk about and wrap for a gift.

STARR DAILY

CHAPTER 1

“**Y**OU NEED NOT BE FRIGHTENED! Through your son shall man be awakened to the message I bring each night and morning in my symbolic death and resurrection!”

Again this strange prophecy was spoken into Mary's heart by the rising sun as it cleared the Mount of Olives. Anxiously she looked behind her, searching the fronds of evergreens for the spying face of Zaele, a Temple maiden of her own age. The evergreens concealed this isolated corner of the balustrade which ran around the Women's Court high in the Temple, and not till yesterday had there ever been an intruder into Mary's little sanctuary.

All were supposed to be at their own private morning prayers but yesterday morning Mary had detected the furtively inquiring eyes of Zaele peering through the evergreen. On being discovered Zaele had fled but Mary had been unable to remove the fear that Zaele might have overheard her talking to the sun.

Each morning as long as Mary could remember she had stood at this isolated corner of the balustrade and greeted the morning sun. The reason for these trysts with the rising sun was a wonderful secret buried deep within her young heart. A heart in which but recently had begun the murmurs of budding womanhood. And this particular morning the murmurs were more insistent than they had ever been before.

Satisfied that Zaele had not dared again to leave her own prayers, Mary leaned against the familiar smoothness of the cool marble column and let her lingering gaze move out over the sanctuary gate of Nicamor, through the peristyle of Solomon's Porch, over the Garden of Gethsemane, across the Kidron Valley and up the Mount of Olives. The sun had cleared the Mount and its reborn light brought new life to the waiting world. Pulsating circles of gold peeled from its circumference and moved toward her through the freshened ethers.

In tones low, clear and sweet she said,

"Today I am fourteen. The time is here that I must leave the Temple—and I am frightened!"

"You need not be alarmed," came the voice she had learned to love so long ago. The most authoritative voice she had heard, yet it held a gentleness so exquisite that she never failed to thrill with its sound.

"That which is about to begin," it continued, "is but that for which we have been preparing since first you stood there, a lonely, bewildered child of three. You had been instructed that you must perform morning prayers in private, so each dawn you came, though you knew not what was expected of you."

The quality of gentleness increased and Mary's heart grew full as she remembered what the sun had meant to her through all her lonely years.

"Each dawn you huddled against the cold base of your column and attempted to pray. You did not know how, so mostly you wept.

"Then you made the discovery that I too came

every morning. I was something you could talk to, so you did. And many talks we have had.

"Tomorrow the priests will choose for you a husband, and your covenant with motherhood shall begin. Be not frightened; you have prepared yourself well!"

The voice ceased. As always when the Voice had spoken, her fears were dispelled and confidence returned.

Then behind her she heard a faint rustle among the evergreens. Turning quickly she looked again into the suspicious eyes of her intruder of yesterday morning. Zaele had contributed more than any of the other maidens to Mary's loneliness and discomfort. Her dark beauty and vivacious temperament were more in accord with life outside the Temple than within. Her parents had consecrated her to the Temple as an infant, so until she was fourteen years of age she would have to remain in the Temple. She was constantly before the Tribunal for infractions of the rules, so there was little doubt that when the time came she would go out into the world, provided she were chosen by a husband.

At every opportunity she ridiculed Mary and the prophecies concerning her, until all the loneliness and misery Mary had suffered in the Temple were personified in this particular girl. A gleam of cunning flashed in Zaele's eyes, then she was gone.

Suddenly Mary wanted desperately to be with her older cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth was the wife of Zacharias. Zacharias was a high priest of the Temple. During his turn to preside over the Temple ceremonies,

Elizabeth was much in the Temple. Although Zacharias was now at their home in Hebron, Elizabeth remained to be near Mary because of her coming betrothal.

In her private chamber Elizabeth greeted Mary with her usual warmth and affection. Though Elizabeth's hair was grey, beneath it were bright, tranquil eyes and classic features; her figure had remained firm, slender and erect.

There had always been aspects of Mary's own life which she did not understand. Mary knew Elizabeth could explain these things if she would for Elizabeth was a fount of understanding. But she was not indulgent. Her understanding did not always produce sympathy. More often, pure logic and justice were forthcoming, regardless of how difficult or unpleasant.

Though Mary loved Elizabeth with all her heart, she had confided but little in her for fear that that which she would have confided was weakness and self-pity. If it had been that, Elizabeth would not have hesitated to say so. Elizabeth was as a mirror reflecting accurately the values of life uncolored by personal feelings.

"Beloved cousin," Mary said, "you are so wise. Tell me why so many of the maidens resent my presence here. It has been true as far back as I can remember. When I was seven you told me that at the time I was consecrated to the Temple the High Priest prophesied I would be the mother of the promised Messiah. Surely this would not generate their resent-

ment, unless in their eyes I am unworthy of such honor!"

Smiling with understanding at Mary's concern, Elizabeth motioned her to the bench beside her.

"Precious child," she said, taking her hand, "in every woman's heart, young or old, within the Temple or without, there is one great longing. Many of us succeed in keeping it concealed, but most of us at some time reveal it in our thoughts and deeds. It is our desire for a strong and noble husband."

Turning to Mary she lifted a whimsical eyebrow and added, "If this strong and noble husband happens also to be rich, we try not to let it disturb us. The other maidens know that tomorrow the strongest, noblest, and wealthiest men in all Palestine will present themselves, and that from those a husband will be chosen for you."

Elizabeth patted Mary's hand and sighed. "Everyone knows more of these things than you. In your heart there is no room for them. Not only are you the prophesied mother of the Messiah, but also you are princess of the House of David and, as such, the wealthiest bride in all Judea.

"Are not the cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem known as the Cities of David? To your family belongs all the lands, even the land upon which stands this temple. According to the laws of David it cannot be sold. The buildings can be sold, but every year of Jubilee the land reverts back to the House of David. Your wealth is boundless. That cannot be questioned.

"But it can be questioned whether or not you will

be mother of the Messiah, because for six hundred years each princess of the House of David has hoped to be the one through whom the Messianic prophecy would be fulfilled."

Elizabeth paused, pensively shrugging her elegantly erect shoulders.

"As yet the promised Messiah has not been born. The princesses of the House of David who were in a position to bring him forth have failed. Hence these have been considered imposters by the resentful, who, in their secret hearts, have felt that if Providence had permitted them to be born a princess of the House of David, they certainly could have given birth to the long awaited Messiah."

Elizabeth patted Mary's hand lightly and continued with playful solemnity. "So, my child, until you show the world the Messiah, you, too, will be thought an imposter and as such, subject to the suspicious resentment of jealous hearts."

Mary's usually smooth forehead showed her perplexity.

"Why, after all these years, did the High Priest prophesy it would be I?"

"Perhaps because, like David, you were a ruddy child," Elizabeth answered. "A child fresh from the sun, with blue eyes and light complexion, born into a land of dark hair, eyes and skin."

Slowly Mary turned on Elizabeth, eyes widened with a question.

"The only one?"

Elizabeth nodded with gentle emphasis, then continued.

"All these qualities place you apart from the others. They are awed, resentful and jealous."

For a long time there was silence. Then with great effort Mary spoke, her words coming slowly as though they had long been locked away.

"I, too, am guilty of resentment," she began. "For years it has grown, little by little. There were nights when I cried myself to sleep with loneliness when all about me were those who could be friends. Yet day after day I was avoided and seldom spoken to, until at times I felt actually poisoned from the fumes of my own resentment."

"Blessed child," Elizabeth said tenderly, "never has a young heart been more sorely tried, and never have the trials been more valiantly overcome. Do not condemn yourself for your resentment. Were your heart less sensitive, less hungry for love, there would have been no resentment."

Elizabeth's words removed an aching burden from Mary. Never before had she confided to anyone this great fear of her growing resentment. It had so profoundly shamed her that not even to her beloved cousin did she dare reveal its existence. Now that she had, she felt wonderfully relieved. But deep within her still was a question: Now that she had confessed the existence of her resentment would she be able to tear it completely out of her heart?

There was another thing which disturbed her. She had never been able to share with Elizabeth her secret

communications with the sun. It wasn't that she feared Elizabeth's disapproval or lack of understanding; it was more a sense of loyalty to that which the sun meant to her. That which the sun represented was beyond discussion with human beings, even with Elizabeth.

Mary remembered the many, many times her only companion had been the sun, although she had hungered to be included in the whispered secrets so avidly indulged in by the pairs and groups of other maidens. Also she had wondered why her mother, the Priestess Anna, though much in the Temple, spent no more time with her than with anyone else. Often she had wanted to ask Elizabeth about this, but felt in some way it would be improper. Since she was leaving the temple tomorrow and did not know when she would see Elizabeth again, she overcame her former reluctance.

"There is much I do not understand about my mother. I would remove from my heart this misunderstanding before I go from the temple to begin my other life. If it is wrong that these questions live in my heart, forgive me; but please do not deny me their answer."

Affectionate understanding kindled in Elizabeth's eyes.

"Ask them, my child. I will do my best with their answer."

"During the years I have been here," Mary began with difficulty, "my mother has been no nearer to me than to the other maids. She seemed always to have so much to do. Seldom has a week passed that I have

not seen her, yet her attitude toward me has never changed."

Mary placed her hand over her heart. "Something here," she murmured, "longs for my mother's affection. Should I not have that feeling?"

Mary was surprised to see Elizabeth's eyes grow moist. However, when she spoke there were no tears in her voice. Her tone was impersonal, a trifle harsh, as though she were chiding Mary for harboring such critical thoughts of her mother's attitude.

"When you were three," Elizabeth stated, "your mother consecrated you to the temple, thus relinquishing all claim to you. Henceforth, your development was to be the temple's responsibility. Thus your mother could contact you only in the capacity of the temple priestess that she is.

"Your mother is a wonderful woman. That which has been denied you was denied her also; the hunger within your mother's heart for you is just as great, if not greater, than your own for her.

"Your mother holds a position in the temple never before held by a woman. To her is entrusted the teaching of the Spoken Records. These records are not written, but given from age to age by word of mouth. In this way not only are the records perpetuated but their secret mysteries protected from the profane.

"These mysteries are those which were given to Moses on the Mount, which he in turn gave to Joshua and the chosen forty. It is your mother's responsibility to teach these mysteries to the priests and vestal vir-

gins, and she is the authority to whom all refer in case of dispute."

Elizabeth's voice softened. "So you see, just as in your life, for the sake of the many, much has been denied you, her life, too, has been dedicated, dedicated to the perpetuation of truth as man knows it."

Mary was weeping silently.

"My beautiful, wonderful mother!" she whispered. "Why did I not ask these questions long ago? Then I would have understood. When the yearnings came I would know she felt them also. I could have turned my yearnings into a shield to protect us both from the hurt of that which was denied us."

Elizabeth placed a comforting hand on Mary's shoulder, then suddenly rose to her feet, quickened with a thought.

"Were you ever told of the courtship and marriage of your mother and father?"

Abruptly Mary ceased her weeping. Slowly she raised her head, lifting to Elizabeth a face as radiantly expectant as a sparkling new day. She dared not speak; pleadingly she shook her head, indicating she had not been told.

Elizabeth strode about the room.

"It is fitting then," she said, "that I tell you. For two reasons. Because tomorrow you will be betrothed; and because the romance and color of your mother's courtship and marriage will live forever among our people as an inspiration of what man's and woman's relationship can be.

"Your mother, Anna, was the most brilliant and

beautiful young woman of her time. Descended from Solomon of the Shepherd Tribe, she was a princess of the House of David. As a teacher entrusted with the unwritten records, she was much in the temple. Often she would listen to the discussions in the outer Court of the Gentiles where priests of all religions were permitted to speak to their followers.

“Jerusalem being at the crossroads of the world where met and mingled the wealth and wisdom from every land, there was no religion with which she was unfamiliar. But not until she heard Nakeeb Shab speak, whose family has lived here in Jerusalem for ages, was she stirred. And at first sight of her, this man who was to be your father fell desperately in love. Nakeeb Shab was a Persian prince, a descendant of Esther and Ahasauerus; he was a very wealthy and pious man as well as very powerful and handsome.”

Mary lived every word Elizabeth spoke. Never had anything that concerned her own life seemed as real as this recital concerning her family. Often in her fancy she had wondered about the lives of her illustrious mother and father, but no one had told her about them, and she had felt it would have been exceedingly improper to ask. Now she was hearing it from the capable lips of Elizabeth.

“Nakeeb Shab,” Elizabeth continued, “came from the family that ruled Palestine when the Persians were in control, and they have lived here ever since. Your father was a highly respected prince; also he was the hierophant in charge of the Persian School of the Magi

located at Nazareth. It was as he spoke to his Magian followers that he and Anna first saw each other.

“At the crossroads of the world these two young people, who had spent their lives only a short distance apart, met and fell in love. Thus, the two oldest, wealthiest and noblest families of mankind were united, the House of Esther and the House of David, leaders of the Magi and of the Jews.”

Elizabeth paused and, looking down at Mary's intent face, smiled whimsically.

“But the union wasn't easy,” she said, “and therein lies the beauty of their courtship. When Nakeeb Shab asked to marry Anna he learned that only if he became a Jew would it be possible. Imagine his conflict! If he were to marry this wonderful woman he must turn Jew, forsaking his religion and his followers. And imagine the anxiety your mother carried about in her heart!”

Elizabeth's voice became vibrant with her own feelings.

“Then as they talked together of their problems, your mother pointed out her discovery of the similarity of all religions as she listened to the different teachers year after year in the Gentiles' Court. Then they compared their own teachings, the Magian and the Jewish, and they found that, in truth, the beliefs were not different, only the manner in which they were interpreted. How happy they were! No longer need their religious convictions separate them.

“So Nakeeb Shab became a Jew. Later, both your mother and father attained second degree initiation

in the School of the Prophets at Nazareth, and as such both were known as Virgins.

“When your father became a Jew he received the name of Joachim. His followers also became Jews but they could enter no farther into the temple than the Court of the Gentiles.

“Joachim owned a strip of land beside the temple which his ancestors had bought from the Hittites before David acquired his kingdom. Upon this strip of land Joachim built a wall in which his followers could live in comfort. The temple permitted him to tear down the intervening uninhabitable wall. Now his people live next to the Gentiles’ Court where they can gather and have their prayers.”

Elizabeth sat down beside Mary and placed her hand on Mary’s slender, erect shoulder.

“My child, you came from the union of the two oldest and noblest families in Palestine; that union brought into harmony the two most powerful religions in the world.

“None of these things happen by chance. The lives of your mother and father, and the lives of their mothers and fathers for generations, were lived according to a plan; its fulfillment shall be in your son. The fulfillment begins tomorrow when your husband will be selected.”

The tremendous responsibility that was hers suddenly swept over Mary, leaving her weak and frightened. Such strong and illustrious forebears! Such selflessness. Magnificence of purpose. She felt no different from anyone else; no special strength was hers

to carry through and fulfill this plan begun so long ago. If such strength existed she did not feel it.

She was grateful when a knock came on Elizabeth's chamber door, for she feared Elizabeth would soon discover her fright and possibly interpret it as weakness.

When Elizabeth returned from answering the door Mary was startled by her pallor. Her face was as pale as parchment and her usually bright eyes were dulled and flecked with red. Her voice was dry and cramped with distress.

"Mary," she said, ever so gently, "a special meeting of the tribunal has been called, and they have sent for you!"

Mary's heart seemed to be in her throat. The tribunal usually met but once each month to pass judgment and punishment on those guilty of transgressing the laws of the temple. Only some very grave infraction would cause the convening of a special session.

"What could it mean?" Mary whispered aloud to herself.

With an effort Elizabeth spoke. "The Vestal Virgin who was sent for you told me that it had something to do with you being guilty of sun-worshiping."

A cold hand tightened on Mary's throat. Now she knew the reason for the unexplained fear caused by Zaele's eyes as she had peered at her through the evergreens this morning. So shocked was Mary that she could not raise her head.

Tilting Mary's chin, Elizabeth gazed with loving affection deep into her eyes and asked, "Is there anything you would like to tell me? Perhaps I could help.

Otherwise you must go at once, for the messenger waits to take you to the court."

Mary could only shake her head. Desperately she wanted to explain to Elizabeth what had happened, but to tell anything at all she would have to describe her morning communions with the Sun from the beginning. However, it would be impossible now in a few words to justify herself, especially with the threat of an impending trial before the temple tribunal. To speak under such circumstances she felt would be disloyal to the Sun.

"Not now, beloved cousin," she managed to say. Then, summoning all her strength, she strode from Elizabeth's chamber and out to the Vestal Virgin waiting to escort her to the court.

Mary had never before been brought before the temple's tribunal, and its solemn austerity struck new fear to her already fluttering heart. On a tier of marble benches sat twelve priests, the purple robes of their office accentuating the somber severity of their faces.

To one side of the huge, cavernous courtroom sat Zaele, obviously pleased with herself; on the opposite side Mary was seated.

A short, rotund priest, with beady black eyes and small hands which he constantly rubbed together, arose from his seat on the bench and bade Zaele come to the center of the court.

Mary recognized him as Ananias. She was not surprised that he was conducting the investigation. From bits of gossip she had overheard, she realized that it was generally known that he was happiest when func-

tioning in this capacity. Also, she had heard how he had effected a division among the priesthood. Many of the younger priests were under his influence and opposed to venerable Halhul, the chief of the Sanhedrin who maintained a generous attitude toward the people in the temple. Halhul's presence among the twelve priests enabled Mary's breath to come more easily.

With a defiant glance at Mary, Zaele marched to the center of the room where a circle of black was inlaid in the white marble floor.

Ananias instructed Zaele.

"Repeat to the tribunal that which you told me concerning Mary's activities when she should have been at her private morning prayer."

With another gloating glance at Mary, Zaele turned to the tier of priests.

"As I was returning from my private prayers this morning, I heard a voice coming from a secluded place on the east balustrade. I parted the evergreens and saw Mary. She was not upon her knees but she stood with her back against a column and was gazing directly into the sun."

Zaele paused while she drew herself higher. Tilting her head for emphasis she slowly and deliberately stated the words she knew would be most condemning.

"And while she looked into the sun I heard her voice. She was talking to the sun! I could not hear the words, but I could hear her voice."

Ananias motioned her to her seat and called Mary into the black circle.

"Are you a sun-worshiper?" he demanded.

Mary lifted her eyes and gazed passively toward him; but she did not speak.

"Answer me, child!" Ananias snapped impatiently, his small eyes beginning to burn. "Have you been using our holy temple as an altar for Shamash, the forbidden sun god?"

Mary continued to stare at her accuser without answering.

Angrily Ananias turned to the other priests.

"Her guilt is obvious, else she would deny it! Imagine our ridicule among the people and the Romans when it is learned that the prophesied mother of the Messiah is a worshiper of Shamash, the sun god."

Producing a scroll from within the bulges of his robe he said, "I will read you the law of Moses concerning such practice:

" 'Take heed therefore unto yourselves,' " he read, " 'lest you corrupt yourselves and make a graven image, and lest you lift up your eyes to heaven and see the sun, moon, stars, and host of heaven, and should be driven to worship them and to serve them which the Lord God has divided and given unto all nations beneath the heavens.' "

Replacing the scroll Ananias spoke again to the court:

"In my opinion the conduct of this maid demands that we take steps to protect the honor of our prophets. We have been in error; the promised Messiah could not come from one so unworthy, one who defiles our temple and defies our laws. We can let it be known that she has rededicated herself to the temple

and will not take a husband; that the mother of the Messiah is yet to appear."

There was an animated stir of approval among most of the priests.

Mary felt as a witness to a scene in which she had no part. She was numbed, dazed beyond the point of further reaction.

The stir increased as the priests argued among themselves. Then it ceased abruptly as majestic old Halhul came to his feet, demanding silence.

"Ananias," he said, in a clear, resonant voice, which held a twinge of accusation, "if the child were guilty of all you charge, her guilt would not be so grave. Suppose she did talk to the sun? What harm is there in that? We all know the ancient law of Moses.

"In his day such a law was needed, for our people were wont to worship anything beyond their comprehension, and all the heavenly bodies were beyond their comprehension.

"It was Moses' task to awaken his people to the truth of the one God, Jehovah. And for an age we have worshiped none but Jehovah!"

The accusing tone in Halhul's voice increased.

"Today, because you fear this little sunflower, you attempt to fasten importance to a conflict of thought which lost its significance a thousand years ago!

"Even if it were a crime to talk to the sun, she has not admitted doing so. Youth is fraught with a fertile imagination. Whether she talked to the sun or imagined she did is of little consequence."

Pausing, Halhul gazed gently down at Mary's piti-

ful little figure standing in the center of the immense courtroom with its vaulted and expansive ceilings and columns.

"Poor child," he continued, "there has been no one else to whom she could talk. Everyone has been afraid that an overture of friendship would be interpreted by the others as an attempt to identify themselves with the royal House of David. It is surprising that something more serious than talking to the sun has not resulted from so abnormal a life."

Halhul's gentle tones ceased. His voice held the promise of unpleasant justice as he turned his attention to Zaele.

"Your intentions are very obvious," he accused. "At the next meeting of the tribunal you have been scheduled to answer for several infractions; you thought this would influence our clemency!"

Halhul lowered his voice to a confidential note.

"Ananias," he said, "your part is not quite so obvious; yet it can be recognized. For some time you and your young followers have attempted to increase the gold in our coffers through diverse channels. Do you think I know not of your traffic with the Romans?"

"I and my followers are getting old. The time will soon come when we will be no more. Then you and your followers can do as you please with the temple and the people who worship here. That is, unless someone, so powerful with the people that you and your avarice could not stand against him, should come forth to confront you!"

Halhul's voice became lower and more accusing.

"Could it be, Ananias, that you are afraid the promised Messiah, prophesied to be born of this maiden, might be the one to spoil your dreams of greed? And by discrediting Mary now, you wish to prevent the coming of this Messiah?"

Halhul's voice cracked out as a whip. "In my opinion the only guilt in this case is upon the head of the accusers!"

This time there was no stir among the priests. Ananias' face was a pale green. Surreptitiously he glanced at his followers for support. They were too frightened by Halhul's words to return his glance.

With as much grace as he could master, Ananias arose and dismissed the tribunal.

Mary hardly realized it was over until the Vestal Virgin who had come for her had put her to bed in her little room and, having arranged her covers as comfortable as possible, departed.

A moment later she was aware of others in her room; from their presence came strong waves of protective love. Forcing open her eyes, she saw Elizabeth standing at one side of her bed. On the other side stood her mother; as always, she stood magnificently poised. As Anna looked down at Mary, the impersonal expression faded from her lovely face. Dropping to her knees she gathered Mary into her arms and holding her daughter's head against her breast, she murmured over and over, "My baby, my baby!"

Mary thrilled with an indescribable sweetness. She had never felt less like weeping yet from her lips came soft whimpering sounds. The communicative

sounds of a babe talking to its mother. In her case, repressed sounds, finally finding their utterance, bringing with their utterance exquisite relief, and a new maturity.

CHAPTER 2

LONG BEFORE the sun was due the next morning, Mary stood against the cool smoothness of her column, waiting. The sweetness of her mother's protective presence, as it had wafted her exhausted body into blissful sleep, still lingered.

Awakening in the early morning hours, she had found her mother gone. Mary would have believed it all a dream had not the effects of her mother's presence been so undeniable.

However, this new-found joy was overshadowed by memories of the tribunal scene. Through her the sun had been placed on trial, publicly defiled by such people as Ananias and Zaele. Her flesh cringed with revulsion as she remembered the details. The main issue of the trial had been whether or not she was worthy to be the Mother of the Messiah as had been prophesied of her.

In her heart of hearts she had hoped that if the Messiah were born of her it would be the result of a natural course of events, that nothing special would be demanded of her. She did not feel that she possessed any special qualifications. But now she was beginning to believe that much depended upon her for which she was inadequate, and she was sorely afraid.

Many times before she had stood as she now stood, her slim, folded arms hugging a thumping heart, wait-

ing for the sun and the assurance it brought. She remembered that previous problems were always dissolved by the time the rays of the sun reached the Garden of Gethsemane.

The mountainside sloping down to the valley of the Kidron, just opposite the city's walls, always remained wrapped in sleeping shadows until the sun cleared its peak. Then its rays crept down the gentle slopes, patiently and thoroughly arousing to the new day every vale by tenderly removing their velvety covers of the night.

Nestled in the foothills and clearly visible from Mary's sanctuary was the Garden of Gethsemane. She could watch the light of the morning sun reach down and lift its shadows, bathing in fresh golden light its olive trees standing among blossoming flowers—pansies, stocks, pinks, anemones, or roses of Sharon, according to their season. When the light reached the garden, in spite of how strong had been her doubts generated during the night before, her apprehensions were lifted. The Garden of Gethsemane, reborn under the light of a new day, became a never-failing shield against the thrusts of her own misgivings.

Shivering from the cold preceding the dawn, Mary wondered when the garden was reborn today if her fears would again be replaced by confidence. The eastern heavens began to turn from black to gray, and from gray to varying shades of purple. The sky soon became light blue as a host of orange tints heralding the approach of the sun fanned across the sky. In the center of the flaming rays appeared the first golden

crown of the rising sun. As it began its climb over the Mount of Olives, Mary spoke:

"Much has happened since yesterday," she began with contrite humility. "I was discovered talking to you. We were placed on trial. They tried to make of us something unholy."

Removing her gaze from the sun, she bowed her head. That which she now wanted to say was dear to her heart.

"There is nothing more holy to me than you, and the words you speak to me. Because of the trial I feel that through me you have been blemished. Perhaps Ananias is right, and I am unworthy to be the Messiah's mother. Today I am to be betrothed that my motherhood can begin. But today more than any other day I feel inadequate."

Immediately the gentle authority of the beloved Voice vibrated in her anxious heart.

"For fourteen years, since the day of your birth, have I waited for this day, the day when you should have proved your fidelity to me. Yesterday you were willing to suffer whatever punishment was forthcoming rather than utter my name in the courtroom.

"Your faithfulness has proved that you are capable of helping me in the work that is mine.

"This work is to demonstrate to man that the death he fears does not exist. Each day I shine upon the earth; each morning I come fresh and bright and sing my way across the sky. But man sees me not; his eyes are fastened upon his feet and his hands, things he can touch, leaving his heart cold and empty."

Mary braced herself against the smooth coolness of the marble column for strength and contact with her own world. Never before had anyone overcome death. Her senses swam. Frantically, she strove to understand the meaning of these strange, wondrous words.

As though reading her feelings, the Sun continued:

"Listen closely to the story I tell. Parts of it you will understand now, other parts not until later.

"At the beginning of time the planet Earth was dark. A great being living in the Sun offered to take up his abode on the darkened Earth in order to assist in Earth's progress toward light.

"This being is LOVE. He is already known by many names to countless races; but always the theme of his song is the same.

"When the hearts of Earth grow cold and lonely the darkness increases. This darkness is reflected to us from the moon, just as our light is reflected to you from the moon.

"It is again time for this being to descend and nourish the hungry hearts of Earth by dispelling darkness with light. However, only through those who live on Earth can Earth be made more light. So, if this being is to bring light, he must do so as life on Earth. He must become a man!

"There is a great difference between the rhythms of the Sun and the rhythms of the Earth. In order for this being to come to Earth, his rhythm must be so altered that he can be born of woman and wear the earthly garb of flesh.

"But only so slow can his rhythm become. In order

for him to reach the Earth, the woman through whom he is to arrive must increase her vibration to a rate that harmonizes with his slowed rhythm.

“Love descends from Sun to Earth! But Earth must reach forth a welcoming hand, else love can reach it not.

“You Mary, can be this welcoming hand. The purity of your heart is bright with a light which we upon the Sun can see. Light and rhythm are the same. Your rhythm reaches high. You can give birth to this being of love! In flesh of your flesh can the light of the Sun walk upon the Earth as a man to awaken man’s awareness of his own true nature, to reveal to man the truth of his Godhood!

“Your son will be able to demonstrate that love is the only power by which man holds dominion over both life and death.

“This Messiah spoken of by the prophets shall mean more to the world than the prophets dreamed. He will be misunderstood by his generation, and by many generations to come, because man is not prepared for that which the Messiah will bring.

“But his coming will quicken man’s preparedness; and the age will come when the Messiah will be understood. At that time, little mother, will my commission be achieved.”

Mary was afire. Such glorious tidings! The fact that a man was to overcome death so completely consumed her heart and mind that for some time the realization that she was capable of being his mother did not penetrate her consciousness.

"'Little Mother' the Sun called me," she repeated over and over to herself. Her entire being still vibrated from the thrill of hearing that wondrous voice call her little mother.

Then all at once its tremendous portent swept over her. She could hardly breathe. Not only was the Messiah to be King of the Jews, but he was to demonstrate man's dominion over death. And she could be the mother of this man.

All of this was more than she could sustain alone. She must see Elizabeth at once. Elizabeth's strength, wisdom and love would support her and give her courage. So anxious was she to see Elizabeth that she could not walk; she must run. To escape comment on her haste she must avoid the more frequently used halls and walks. Next to the balustrade was a seldom used walk, mostly hidden by shrubs and evergreens. Lifting the folds of her skirts in one hand and clasping her veil with the other, she sped along this concealed path.

Rounding a curve, Mary came to an abrupt stop. Seated at a pool in the center of the walk was Zaele. Her head and shoulders were bare; and artistically arranged in her dark, luxuriant hair was a cluster of bright red flowers. She had obviously been admiring herself in the pool.

The removal of her veil, her bare shoulders, and the flowered ornaments in her hair were unforgivable infractions of the temple laws, especially at a time when she should have been at her private morning prayers.

Zaele was startled and frightened; but as she recognized Mary, her fear changed to anger. Snatching

the flowers from her hair she crushed them in her hand and then threw them into the pool. Tossing her hair in defiance, she snapped accusingly:

"Following me! So you can report me to old Hal-hul!" Then a resentful rage consumed her. "Only you can have any man in Palestine for a husband. I have no rich dowry." Her voice developed a sarcastic rasp: "Neither am I to be the mother of the Messiah. You—you sunworshiper!"

To Mary this last taunt was blasphemous. The resentment, gathering since first she realized that she was different from the other maids, rushed unchecked into her heart, bursting into unbridled resentment. Resentment that her life had been ridiculed before the tribunal yesterday, resentment at this girl in whom all resentment was personified, this girl who dared profane her Sun and the altar of her life.

The sudden, unexpected fury in Mary's face frightened Zaele to her feet. Taking a step toward her, Mary raised her hand, to strike this personification of the cause of her years of misery. So frightened was Zaele that she could not move. For an instant Mary's hand remained poised; in that instant Zaele sufficiently overcame her fright to turn and flee.

Mary remained rigid, her hand still raised to strike Zaele. Gradually her mind cooled. Her body relaxed. Bewildered, she stared at her trembling uplifted hand. Gradually she lowered it as though it were contemptible and did not belong to her. Her entire body twitched violently as though it had been cruelly lashed.

The fumes of resentment evaporated and reason returned. Mary realized the fear she had harbored all along was true. She *was* unworthy! That which she had fought and conquered, all these years in the temple, had overcome her on the last day, the day she was to have left her temptation forever.

One capable of the emotion she had just experienced could not bring the Messiah into the world—especially the one of whom the Sun just spoke.

Holding as far from her as possible the still trembling hand, she stared at it with wide-eyed incredulity. Her attention focused upon its vibratory motion. The words of the Sun concerning vibration and rhythm were frightfully fresh in her mind. Gladly would she have severed from her body this member, trembling yet from the poison of resentment. She was sufficiently familiar with the meaning of vibration to know that her trembling hand was a manifestation of a vibration, but vibration in its lowest form, caused by the emotion of resentment. A hand trembling from desire to strike the person of another could never attain the exquisite rhythm of which the Sun spoke, could never be the instrument of love's descension upon Earth!

With anguished effort she forced herself to continue toward Elizabeth's chamber. She would confess, and Elizabeth could tell the priests. Then it would be announced there would be no betrothal. As Ananias had accused, the mother of the Messiah was yet to be born to the House of David.

Mary finally reached the curtain leading to Elizabeth's chamber. There her strength failed utterly. To

part the curtain and enter was impossible. Her lowered glance fastened upon the hand which had lifted itself so readily under the impulse of resentment; it now hung as if lifeless.

Suddenly a new strength moved through Mary, born of a condemnation of this member so willing to offend her a moment ago, and now hiding behind an inability to open the way to confession of its deed. With this new strength of condemnation, Mary forced the hand to part the curtain. In the deliberate slowness of her movement she felt a vague sense of justice; the hand was being forced to consciously provide its own punishment.

Elizabeth sat on a marble bench; the sweetness of her familiarity was accentuated because Mary's hopes associated with it were gone. Elizabeth's stiff embroidered cap beneath her flowing veil mocked Mary because it was the headdress all married women wore. Many times Mary had pictured herself crowned with the warm dignity of such a cap but the possibility seemed gone now forever.

Elizabeth greeted her with a smile so sincere and radiant that deep inside something gave way. Suddenly Mary was a tired and bewildered little girl wanting only love and sympathy. Running across the chamber, she threw herself upon her knees, burying her head in Elizabeth's lap. Quietly and desperately she sobbed.

With wordless patience Elizabeth stroked her head. When the violent sobbing had lessened, Elizabeth spoke:

"Such painful grief must surely come from a self-

inflicted wound. Tell me why you weep, my child. Perhaps my more seasoned heart can absorb a portion of the pain."

Without lifting her head from the security of Elizabeth's lap, Mary poured forth the story of her unworthiness. She told how Zaele's words had provoked such great resentment within her heart that violence of hand could easily have been the result. She confessed that with such capabilities of evil lying dormant within her she felt certain it could not be she of whom the prophets spoke.

Elizabeth's answer was to take the hand which clasped her knee so frantically and press its feverish palm to the cool firmness of her own. Not until the tension of Mary's hand lessened did Elizabeth speak.

"My child, it is true we must not be slave of our emotions. But neither should we be void of spirit. What to you is an unforgivable sin, to another might not merit remembering until the next hour. If the cloth were not so white, undetectable would be the spot. Fear not for your unworthiness. Worthiness has no better proof than confession of its lack."

Turning her head, Mary stared anxiously into the face of her friend while beating feebly in her heart arose wings of new hope. So much did she love this face and so sensitive was she to its moods that even now, miserable as she was with her own problems, she was aware of a new and different something in Elizabeth's face.

Its beauty was the same. But always before there had been a vague loneliness that now was gone. In its

place was a subtle, undefinable joy. Elizabeth returned Mary's inquiring gaze with an encouraging smile, but as she spoke her voice was firm with purpose.

"You have a destiny to fulfill. Doubt and pain are markers of your progress in its fulfillment.

"Emotions must be overcome. To be overcome they must be exposed. The exposure is painful, their subjugation always uncertain."

With protective affection Elizabeth pressed Mary's face close to her lap. Her eyes were pensively distant as she continued. Mary recognized the tone of prophecy in her voice.

"Your life is to be very unusual, my child. Through you the stigma of womanhood shall disappear from the earth; no longer will woman be chattel and slave. Motherhood will cast aside her contemptible rags, wearing in their place royal silks.

"And, through you, man will grow toward his maturity. In every man is the seed of Good. This seed will grow only in the soil of love. Also, in every man is love of mother which he hides from the scorn of other men."

Mary was accustomed to Elizabeth's profound prophecies. But never before had her words stirred tiny golden bells deep within her. The prophetic tone increased.

"Because of you, man will admit his love of mother as proudly as he now flaunts his shield of war. In this, his first professed love, man's dormant seed of Good will begin its growth. The growth of Good in the ages to

come will extend outward. From mother to brother it will spread. And the time will be when the Good in man will dominate his 'Will' toward all, even to the stranger in foreign lands. All women will be his mother; all men, his brothers!"

The meaning of Elizabeth's words was not clear to Mary. She could not understand how the result of her life could bring about such wonderful changes in the present attitude of man. However, it was clear that Elizabeth did not feel her unbridled passion had rendered her unfit to carry on. She could still be betrothed and leave the Temple!

Elizabeth's fondness for her would not have affected her opinion. Elizabeth was always just. Mary searched her heart for any withheld evidence. She found none. True, she had not mentioned the Sun, but the Sun had naught to do with her resentment.

Thinking of the Sun, Mary realized the words of Elizabeth and those of the Sun were similar. Both had spoken of a love in whose power it was to awaken the Good in man! Suddenly Mary was more confident than ever. The Sun and Elizabeth, her two sources of strength, had told her the same things concerning the wondrously incredible, incomprehensible things which she was capable of doing and becoming.

She would try not to doubt their wisdom, but pray that if they were right the ability to fulfill their prophecies would be hers when needed.

Elizabeth was speaking again, this time in a joyous, confidential whisper.

"In order that you may have evidence of this truth

I speak, and see the pattern of purpose already begun in our lives, I will share with you a wondrous secret.

"The day of our betrothal, Zacharias and I dedicated ourselves to the will of God in the hope that He would bless us with a son. But the years of our fruitfulness went by, leaving barren our marriage."

Elizabeth paused and gazed steadily into Mary's eyes.

"Long have I passed the age of conception. Yet, at this very moment I am with child! A holy child! Our prayers are being answered in greater measure than we could dream."

Never before had Mary seem a face more beautiful as Elizabeth continued.

"Long after we had despaired of its arrival, it comes. Not just a child, any child, as we had prayed, but a holy one."

Mary leaped to her feet to be beside Elizabeth. With happy impatience she awaited the remainder of the story, her own problems utterly forgotten.

Now she understood the quiet joy in her cousin's face where before had been resigned loneliness. Mary thrilled to her toes at such a miraculous happening. After all these years Elizabeth was with child.

"How wonderful!" she murmured, hoping breathlessly Elizabeth would see fit to tell her more. Elizabeth's manner sobered. "Zackarias hoped to be the priest who would choose your husband tomorrow, but alas he has lost his power of speech and is now in Hebron."

Mary had heard whisperings concerning the de-

parture of Zacharias, but their insinuations were so variant she had heeded none of them.

Elizabeth explained, "Zacharias was burning incense before leading the prayers of the multitudes awaiting him in the court. Suddenly on the right side of the incense altar an angel of the Lord appeared. Zacharias was stunned and fearful.

"The angel spoke. 'Fear not, Zacharias, for your prayers have been heard. Elizabeth, your wife, shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.

" 'In the sight of the Lord he shall be great. He shall drink no wine; and from his mother's womb be filled with Holy Breath.

" 'In the spirit of Elias he shall go before the coming of the Lord and turn many of the children of Israel to their God!'"

Such happenings so awed Mary she felt faint; her heart pounded wildly.

Elizabeth continued, "Recovering from his fear, Zacharias said to the angel, 'This cannot be for I am an old man and my wife well stricken in years.'

"Then the angel said to Zacharias, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God and am sent to bring you these glad tidings.

" 'Because you believe not my words, you shall be dumb, unable to speak, until these things I tell you have been performed in their season!

"The people waiting in the Court were restless, wondering that Zacharias tarried so long in the Temple. And much did they marvel when he did appear, unable to speak to them."

A sense of pity for Zacharias penetrated Mary's spellbound consciousness.

"Poor Zacharias!" she murmured.

Elizabeth nodded her head in pensive agreement. "Yes," she said slowly, "Zacharias, the man, and Zacharias, the priest, have not been very harmonious companions. As a man he has done many things of which the priest did not approve. And, at times, the opinion of the man has so confounded the priest that the priest knew not what he believed. Thus, when the angel told Zacharias, the priest, he was to have a son; Zacharias, the man, remembering his years, raised his voice in disbelief. So his voice was taken from him."

Elizabeth paused, smiling slightly, a deep light of affectionate understanding for her husband shining in her eyes.

"Now that both the man and the priest have had time to think, I imagine both have concluded that in the miracle of God there is no difference between suddenly being struck dumb and one's wife conceiving after the passing of his season of potency."

Glancing at Mary's intent, doleful face Elizabeth clasped her shoulders and playfully shook them.

"Come, my child, let's not waste any more sympathy on Zacharias. He can still write what he wishes. And, believe me, he was never more content.

"One would think for forty years I had plied him constantly with idle chatter and stupid questions, so pleased is he now with his inability to answer me. He just walks in his garden and follows me with his eyes—eyes that still seem to doubt what they see, but never—

theless eyes that are extremely pleased with themselves and with that which goes on around them."

Laughing softly, Elizabeth kissed Mary's brow and arose to depart. Turning back she said, "Your mother and father await with the others in the court. Your father has brought a friend of his. Perhaps you remember him, Joseph, of the Carpenter Tribe?"

Mary shook her head. "Father has spoken of him," she replied. "He seems to very much admire this Joseph."

"Everyone does," Elizabeth said quietly. "He is a wonderful man, a descendant of David through the House of Nathan who trained his sons to be designers of synagogues. They are called the Carpenter Tribe. Joseph inherited all the lands of the Carpenter Tribe. A wise and wealthy man!"

After Elizabeth had gone, Mary wondered why she had suddenly spoken of this Joseph with such feeling. However, the wonders of the forthcoming events quickly excluded all irrelevant thoughts. But just as though it were not irrelevant, the name of Joseph of the Carpenter Tribe, and the way Elizabeth had spoken of him, recurred to her mind as she thought of the prospective husbands gathering around the altar in the court.

But her young heart had many things to ponder regarding that which was about to take place in that part of the Temple.

CHAPTER 3

THE MUFFLED sound of many sandalled feet approaching outside her chamber door announced to Mary the arrival of the women of the Temple who were to form the procession in which she was to descend to the court where Priest Halhul was to choose for her a husband.

Mary's heart quickened. The beginning of her new life was at hand. It would be a completely strange life, and, if an unsuitable husband were chosen for her, a very fearful life.

Glancing about the austere room in which she had lived and remembering how unhappy most of the years had been, she felt a momentary surge of strength and impatience to greet the strange, to welcome the new. On the crest of this urge she parted her curtained door and took her place in the waiting procession.

Leading the procession was her mother, High Priestess Anna; behind her were the priestesses and vestal virgins, then came the temple maidens. Mary's place was at the head of the maidens.

It all seemed unreal to her. The women in the procession were like strangers instead of people she had lived with for years. She even imagined she saw open resentment in the faces of some of them. A quick glance at Zaele, near the rear, left no doubt. Zaele walked with obvious awareness of her own personal

charm and equal disdain for the purpose of the procession.

Down into the court they moved with solemn dignity. From the window in her room Mary had often looked out upon Roman soldiers marching through the streets with a prisoner in their midst. She wondered why she should think of such things at this time. Maybe because the prisoner, like herself, was always in the middle of the procession. Did she feel she was a prisoner? A prisoner of prophecy? Her life bound and predetermined by the hopes and fears of others?

For a fleeting instant she allowed herself this self-indulgent sense of sacrifice, but only for an instant. Then, remembering her covenant with the Sun, and the glorious secret mysteries she and Elizabeth shared, she proudly stepped forward toward this adventurous life that was ahead of her.

On a little balcony beneath the altar the women seated themselves in the order of their arrival, Mary standing alone before the altar. Above their heads arose the altar, the same altar upon which were sacrificed lambs and doves for the remission of the sins of those who paid for the ceremony.

Extending from the level of the altar was a latticed porch leading into the Holy Place. Often Mary stood among the people at the salutation hour and watched as various priests in turn led the Temple services, but never before had she been so impressed with the solemn grandeur of the Marble Court of the Priests.

Never before had Halhul's priestly garb so affected

her. Erect and motionless he stood beside the high altar. Gathered below were many men. When first Mary looked out on them she was conscious only of forms and colors. Their striped cloaks of reds, yellows, blacks and blues, with girdles of impressive silk signified to all the measure of their wealth. Halhul had announced, days ago, that all who wished to be among those chosen from must bring with them a shepherd's staff. Mary had never seen so many men and all seemed to have a shepherd's staff at their side.

In the space reserved for her kin, Mary saw her mother and father, both resplendent in their pride and dress. Beside her mother stood Elizabeth, and Mary's heart warmed to her smile of sweet assurance.

In Elizabeth's posture Mary sensed a new dignity. As daughter of Aaron and teacher in the Temple, Elizabeth had always carried her height and classical features with queenly grace. But now there was something new. Mary thrilled with the realization that this new dignity must come from their secret—the life developing within Elizabeth would add dignity to any woman's bearing; it added dignity to the entire estate of man.

Mary tried to imagine how it must feel to carry within one's womb a holy child. But try as she might, such potential ecstasy was beyond her imagination. She could generate no feeling comparable to the subtle quality of joy she sensed in Elizabeth. Elizabeth had told her that after today she would retire to her home in Hebron to take away her reproachful presence from among men, because to them the gray of her hair rebuked the growth in her womb.

A sudden hush spread throughout the court. Everyone lifted his eyes to Halhul who had moved from his statue-like stillness and raised his arms and face heavenward. Abruptly he lowered them, and seven members of the priesthood came from seven antechambers of the court. Moving among the crowd, they began gathering from the men the shepherd's staffs which indicated they were among those from whom Halhul was to choose.

As the crowd stilled a bit, Mary caught her first glimpse of the man standing beside her father. In contrast to the clashing colors and shuffling feet of the others, this man wore a robe of pure white and stood with the simple majesty of a cedar upon the slopes of Lebanon. There was a virility in his slender erectness that held fast her gaze. The rays of the noonday sun danced with lightning toes in the silvery abundance of his curled hair. His skin was olive, but so clear it seemed to glow.

This must be Joseph of the Carpenter Tribe, her father's friend. In his hand she saw a lengthy staff upon which the butts of five sprigs still remained as knobs to fit his grasp. She wondered if it were a staff he always carried or a symbol that he, too, was a candidate for the choice of Halhul.

Mary knew he was older than the other candidates in years, but time had touched him so lightly that its passing showed only in the nobleness of his brow and the wisdom deep within his eyes—calm, luminous eyes which suddenly flashed in her direction.

Quickly Mary looked away, but not before she

sensed a strange gentleness in his steady gaze, a gentleness that wore a cloak of warm security. Such a feeling she had never known before, and so sweet it was she feared it should not be. She fought against its force by compelling herself to watch the priests as they gathered the staffs from the men. Her heart beat strangely as she saw a priest approach Joseph, hesitate uncertainly, and then take his staff.

Up the altar steps the staffs were carried and back into the Holy Place. The seven priests returned to their original stations. Then Halhul strode solemnly across the connecting porch and disappeared through the curtained entrance to the Holy Place where the priests had left the gathered staffs.

The longer he was gone, the deeper grew the hush within the Temple, until even the city noises beyond the wall were stilled as if all earth paused to listen for a message from the sky.

Mary's gaze moved across the sea of anxious faces and restless eyes. Again she saw Joseph. He seemed not to have moved, but still stood erect and quietly poised. Suddenly his brilliant eyes flashed like the sun on a shining surface, and turned toward the altar.

Halhul stood upon the balcony. In his hand was a staff. By its five sprig butts Mary recognized it as Joseph's. Her throat hurt from the tumult in her heart. She was thrilled with awe, as within her a strange conviction was born that behind these deeds of man the hand of God did move.

Halhul held the staff aloft and in vibrant, reverent tones announced:

"When first I touched this staff it was of dry and seasoned wood. Then before my eyes a bud of green appeared and burst into the blossom which you see. This is the sign for which I prayed and by its token he who brought this staff is chosen. And now the bearer of this staff will raise his hand."

From amid the crowd, frozen in stillness, Joseph slowly raised his hand. When it reached its fullest extension a dove of purest white fluttered down from among the upper recesses of the Temple and perched upon Joseph's head, its bright eyes and sleek neck moving back and forth as if in joyous affirmation of Halhul's selection.

For a long moment the people were hushed by this further sign. But soon their joy burst forth, and upon Joseph was poured enthusiastic blessings from them all.

* * *

When the betrothal ceremony was over, Elizabeth walked with Mary as they returned to Mary's chamber.

Never had the faces Mary passed seemed more familiar. There were old serene faces, middle-aged uncertain faces, and young eager faces; faces she had seen each day for years, faces, which she might never see again. For the first time she felt a keen affection for these faces—even though some had contributed to the unhappiness of her life. They were, after all, the only faces she knew. The old and familiar, no matter how uncomfortable, is always more dear and secure than the unfamiliar.

Today Mary was to leave the Temple. For a short

time she would be in her mother's home, for a princess must be married in the Royal home. Then she would go into a life which held naught but the strange, the new, the unfamiliar.

Certain things would be expected of her, the nature of which she had heard in fragments. Her fancy enlarged the fragments, but she had no way of knowing how near to the truth she had arrived.

As she and Elizabeth crossed the huge Court of the Women, Mary looked about at its lofty splendor. For the first time it seemed friendly.

The colors of the mosaics upon which she trod were warm and sympathetic. The marble columns had lost their solemn dignity. The bubble of the fountain seemed a gurgle of contentment; and from the swaying evegrees came a peaceful, rhythmic murmur.

Mary was so overcome by the unexpected friendliness of it all that she hesitated. Elizabeth paused and looked quizzically back at her. Confusedly Mary quickly resumed her pace.

Reaching Mary's chamber they sat in silence. Upon Mary's finger was the ring with which Joseph had made his pledge; in her hand she held the golden coin with which the pledge was sealed. Her eyes were on the coin, symbol of the fact that the remainder of her life had been pledged to this Joseph man.

Slowly she placed the coin in a tiny box made of highly polished cedar from the hills of Lebanon. The box was a betrothal gift from her father, who, smiling significantly, had confided that it had been wrought by Joseph's hand. Closing the lid, she turned the box

in her fingers. Through her window the rays of the afternoon sun revealed the perfect craftsmanship displayed in the delicate inlay.

She glanced across at Elizabeth, who was watching with silent understanding. Averting her eyes, and with difficulty, Mary brought forth the question, "What manner of man is this Joseph?"

Quietly Elizabeth answered, "The man most fitting in all the land to be your husband. The purest of heart, the noblest of mind, the strongest of body."

Mary pondered her words, then continued, "Why have I never seen him before? Throughout the years he has never stood among the multitudes and worshiped in the courts, or I would have seen him."

"And if you had seen him," Elizabeth suggested with gentle significance, "you would have remembered him?" Without waiting for an answer Elizabeth explained, "Joseph objects to the rite of animal sacrifice; therefore the law excludes him from the privilege of temple worship."

Something deep within Mary stirred. Many, many times she had listened to the terrified bleating of little lambs as they neared the scattered blood and burned flesh of their own kind. And many times she had gone to sleep to the cooing of doves which at the next morning's worship would be killed and burned. Many times as she lay awake listening to their gentle sounds, in the guarded depths of her heart she had wondered if there were not less cruel ways of expressing adoration to Jehovah.

"Does this Joseph have any other strange convictions?"

Again Elizabeth nodded, and Mary thought she caught a twinkle in her eye which did not fit the solemnity of her bearing.

"He does not accept the tyranny of wealth and will neither make, nor trade in, weapons which man can use in war; nor will he own or deal in slaves."

A sigh of something akin to relief trembled upon Mary's lips. Her inner being bore witness that all these things were right.

"Are there others in the land that believe as he does?"

Elizabeth nodded. "Many," she said softly.

No wonder she had never seen him before, Mary thought. Part of his convictions were contrary to the Jewish law and another part contrary to the law of the Romans. The Temple had enough conflict with the Palace without borrowing more through imprudent sympathies or affiliations.

Smiling, Elizabeth announced lightly, "Zacharias and Joseph are very close friends."

"Yes?" Mary encouraged.

"They admire each other very much, but their beliefs are so opposite that when they are together it is amusing to note the careful path their talk treads in order not to crush the other's toes."

Mary smiled, but this friendship between Joseph and Zacharias brought to mind a question that still filled her anxious heart. A question her maidenhood did ask, but found difficult to utter, even to the under-

standing council of her kin and friend. But ask she must, so with difficulty she made a start.

"Is it not dangerous," she murmured, "that my husband should be of my father's generation? I have devoted my life to preparation for motherhood. I understand but little of these matters, but I am aware that often barrenness results from unions wherein the span of ages is so wide."

Elizabeth realized how difficult it had been for Mary to ask this question, and prepared herself to phrase the answer with care.

She arose and walked to the table laden with betrothal gifts from which she selected a string of beads of many colors. She pulled their cool, round smoothness thoughtfully through her fingers and then laid them across Mary's folded hands.

"Each bead," she said, "might be of different color, or come from different clime or time. But each is held within its place and sequence by the string. Changing tides of circumstance can cause part of it, or the whole, to move, just as I moved the beads, in part, through my fingers and then handed the string as a whole to you. But the sequence of the beads remains the same.

"In such manner are people's lives strung together. He who strings the beads has a purpose to fulfill. The age of one, the color of another, these were all considered in the making of his plan. A single bead that could break and crumble would not be used because this would bring to naught the purpose of the whole. And he who planned this string knew well the strengths of his materials."

Reaching over and touching one of the beads, she continued, "This bead is Mary, the next Joseph, perhaps one of the others is I, and still another my son to come. Who knows? But I do know that every bead in the string will be found sufficient to carry out the purpose for which they all were strung! Does this answer your question, my child?"

In reply Mary took her hand, kissed it, and held it to her cheek. She felt weak and small, like a birdling whose wings are caught in a strong wind of purpose. Her life stretched forth as a winding, unknown trail. She would leave the familiar life in the Temple; new and strange duties would fill each day. But in the secrecy of her heart was a shield against all fears of the unknown. The shield of her covenant with the Sun. The Sun had said she could bring into this world a man so strong in the power of love that even death would be defied. Somewhere along the unknown trail that lay ahead this wondrous thing could be. She knew not where or how; but he who strung the beads would know.

And then there was this Joseph man. She could still feel the strength of him as he stood by her side at the betrothal ceremony. So, with the Sun, the stringer of the beads, and Joseph, she felt she had all the help anyone could need. As ever, her greatest fear was that within herself could be found the weak link of the chain.

Still holding Elizabeth's hand she spoke:

"Without your love and wisdom upon which to

lean, this would have been a day of terror. Now I can go forth to my task with confidence.

“When first I feel in me the life of him of whom the prophets speak, I will straightway come to you, so that together we may share the joy of the things to come!”

Standing at her side, Elizabeth looked down. Wistful was her smile; solemn her words:

“In the things to come our part will truly be a woman’s part. For we shall share joy only as we discover the *purpose hidden in pain*.”

CHAPTER 4

WHEN MARY was prepared to leave, Halhul convened all the women of the Temple. Standing at his side, Mary watched as they approached from all sides of the court. No longer did she fear to leave the Temple. Elizabeth's story of the string of beads had awakened courage and confidence. Now she welcomed the challenge of the unfamiliar.

Presently she would leave behind the loneliness and isolation she had endured. What was more important, she told herself, she would be free from the cause of her resentment. The life in which it existed would now be exchanged for a new one.

She stole a glance at Zaele, the girl she had surprised at the pool and who had provoked in her such a terrifying emotion. Zaele's arrogant smugness, as she stood waiting with amused indulgence for whatever additional ceremony must be endured on Mary's behalf, caused a little hard knotted feeling in the pit of Mary's stomach. She felt the heat of resentment crawling up her neck.

Quickly she looked away. Oh, how grateful she was that today Zaele would pass out of her life! How wonderful to be free of her. Mary wondered what this last gathering was for, and wished Halhul would quickly have done with it.

Lifting his hands for silence, Halhul spoke:

"It is the time and year when the weaving of another Temple Veil is due."

Mary wondered what this could have to do with her. The Temple Veil hung between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies, and none but the High Priest ever passed beyond its folds, and he only on the day of Atonement. In the Holy of Holies was the Ark, with its mercy seat, and in the outer Holy Place were the altar of incense, table of shew bread, and golden candlestick used for the daily service.

"Today Mary leaves the Temple," Halhul continued. "In accordance with the prophets, five handmaidens shall accompany her. Mary and the maidens will take with them the sacrificial wool and from it spin the threads with which the Veil is to be woven. The threads of purple will be spun by Mary's hand. The other colors will be spun by the maidens who accompany her. Those whose names I now call will be the ones to go: Saphora, Rebecca, Susanna, Abigea and Zaele."

Mary's senses reeled. Zaele was to be one of her handmaidens! The temptation from which she thought she would be free was to be closer than ever! Suddenly she was weak and afraid. Why must this be? Had she not suffered enough at the hands of this girl and her associates without having a closer association thrust upon her?

In her inner panic, she glanced about as a frightened animal seeking escape. Her glance swept over the descending steps toward the western gate of Coponius and the outside world; there it fastened itself.

The inner side of the walls were draped in the afternoon shadows; the sun had reached a point in its westward journey where its rays completely filled the arch of the gate of Coponius. In the midst of shadows, this arched gateway was filled with brilliant vibrant light. Mary interpreted it as a beckoning door of light, the Sun, her friend and counselor, pointing the way through a path of shadows. Vibrating in the archway she saw these words:

“Be not afraid, I will light the way and there will be strength when strength is needed.”

* * * *

Outside the gate a caravan of camels waited, their rich trappings and coat of arms indicating that they belonged to the House of David. Joseph, Anna and Joachim waited with the caravan. Presently, Mary and the maidens came through the gate. The single-humped camels were made to lower their saddle litters so that the passengers could climb into basket-like compartments lined with cushions and covered with awnings.

Through the gate five priests came bearing the sacrificial wool from which was to be spun the thread to weave the new veil. When this had been loaded into a pack-saddle, the caravan began its journey through the streets of Jerusalem toward the Damascus Gate at the northwest wall of the city.

Joseph, on a huge, powerful camel, led the way. Mary's camel followed; then came the maidens, two in one litter and three in another; behind them were Mary's mother and father. Bringing up the rear were

several camels laden with tents and supplies, attendants walking at their sides.

Mary experienced a new lightness of heart as the procession moved through David Street, a narrow, winding opening between over-hanging walls that had resounded to so many different sounds—songs of triumph, yells of battle rage, moans of despair, murmurs of hope, cries of anguish, bursts of laughter, and the blessings of pious priests. To her it was the passageway into a new life, a new world.

Mary was thrilled, even though in the litter behind her, in the person of Zaele, she carried with her into her new world a personification of all that was unpleasant in the old. Turning her head slightly she glanced at Zaele. Zaele's eyes were fastened upon Joseph in feminine appraisal and speculation. Mary felt a new concern in regard to Zaele.

The constant cloud of dust, the exasperating deliberateness of other beasts of burden as they moved aside to allow the caravan to pass, only added zest to Mary's new adventure. The exuberance of her youth, the sensitiveness of her reactions, and the strength of her spirit responded to the stir and color of the crowded shops. Each scene aroused new excitement. From now on she would also be a part of this outside world.

Across their path ran a white sow followed by a litter of pink pigs twinkling in the sun. Mary laughed in sheer delight at the sight of them. Turning in her seat, she stared at an Arab holding a young gazelle in his arms, fascinated by the bright softness of its eyes. When she again faced in the direction she was going,

she caught Joseph smiling at her. In his fleeting smile was the same gentle understanding she had seen before. As if he had fathomed her very thoughts and would patiently stand by while she became accustomed to the unfamiliar outside world.

The bronzed people in flowing garments of many colors, the grotesque camels under various trappings and burdens, the flocks of flat-tailed sheep and lop-eared goats, the shallow curiosity of the people, the brilliant fronts of the shops extending back into mysteriously dark interiors; all these things kept busy her eyes, eyes that had been so long within the Temple walls. However, something kept her from losing herself completely in the fascinating spell of this new world—a vague feeling that the attractive colors, noises and motions of her new world must always be but passing scenes in her journey. To have, but not to hold; to be of, but not in. Together with this feeling was a warning that hidden within the beckoning scenes were briars to snare and scratch her feet if she tarried on her journey.

Her young mind and heart neither clearly understood the threat of this new world, nor the promise of the complete journey. With a little shrug of impatience, she attempted to throw off the weight of purpose that had rested so long and heavily on her young shoulders, shoulders which at this moment were erect and eager. Suddenly Mary made a discovery. She found that at regular intervals her eyes returned from the attractions of the passing panorama to the back of Joseph's neck.

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"Why," she asked herself, "do I do that?"

In an honest effort to answer herself, she consciously studied the back of Joseph's neck. After a while she decided it was because, no matter what the motion of the camel, the dignity of his bearing remained the same. His shoulders were broad, lean and square; and rising from their squareness his neck was smooth and strong. Mary saw now that the reason his neck caught her eyes was that it always held Joseph's head at the same angle. Regardless of the sway, Joseph's head seemed to be independent of its motion. The rest of his body moved in rhythm, but his head maintained at all times a certain posture. In his carriage was the dignity of dominion, dominion over all motion.

Mary wondered why she had not noticed it before. Perhaps it was not so obvious. If it had been there would have been more arrogance than authority in his manner. That is what it was—authority over himself and over all with whom he came in contact. Something stirred deep within her as she again sensed the subtle strength of this man with whom she was to live and to share this new adventure in living.

She felt no fear or anxiety about this authority. It seemed to spring from a state of being. Most authority she had encountered came from possessions or a state of office, but his authority came from a state of *being*. The strength of his dominion lay in his poised stillness. When again she returned her attention to the passing scenes their fascination had strangely faded.

At the junction of David Street and the street leading to the Damascus Gate they encountered a tense

traffic congestion. The caravan of a rich merchant was entering David Street from the Damascus Gate. Ahead of the caravan came several burly men with prodding poles savagely clearing the narrow street so that their caravan could come through.

A very small, aged woman with her meager flock of sheep was caught in the path of those making way for the caravan. Her sheep were scattered in terror by the cruel proddings of the poles. The woman herself was so roughly brushed aside that she fell in a heap against a shop front.

Joseph quickly turned his huge camel sideways, blocking the street. One of the advancing prodders was against Joseph's camel before he recognized the royal trappings of the obstructing caravan. Leaning over, Joseph snatched the pole from the man and prodded him in the chest with it so hard that he was thrown heavily to the street.

Holding the pole firmly against the man's middle, Joseph began to twist. The pole caught in the man's clothes. Harder and harder Joseph twisted; tighter and tighter wound the clothes, until, so tightly wound were they that by using his camel's back as a lever Joseph was able to raise him into the air at the other end of the pole. Holding the now screaming, squirming man aloft at the end of his own prodding pole, Joseph sat calmly upon his camel, blocking any traffic coming from the direction of the merchant's caravan.

The other men on seeing to what use one of their prodding poles had been put quickly disappeared in the direction from which they had come.

Still holding the man aloft, Joseph turned toward the little old woman, who had now gained her feet, and instructed gently, "Shepherdess, gather your sheep and go your way!"

The shepherdess moved to do Joseph's bidding. As she passed near him, she looked up.

Mary could see her upturned face and was astonished at its brightness and poise. She heard these words from the little shepherdess as she passed:

"The day will come, Joseph, son of David, when I will repay you for this noble deed."

Mary saw astonishment momentarily sweep across Joseph's face. Smiling to himself, he glanced penetratingly once more at the strange little shepherdess; then with a mighty heave he tossed aside the man and the pole and signalled for his own caravan to proceed.

Joseph's manner did not indicate that anything unusual had happened. But to Mary a new side to her betrothed had been revealed. She had been spellbound by Joseph's unexpected actions. She had witnessed both his strength and his gentleness. Now she knew they both extended into each other. His strength was used for gentleness; and his gentleness drew on a tremendous strength.

The royal trappings of the House of David plus Joseph's demonstration of his contempt for the merchant's tyranny was sufficient to insure their unhindered progress through the street. Near the Damascus Gate they passed the merchant's caravan, now stopped and off to one side to permit their passing. Standing

near the caravan was the merchant himself, profusely bowing with respect and fear.

Outside the gate they paused briefly in an immense olive grove. The attendants moved from one camel to another, checking the loads and harness against the strain of the forthcoming journey.

Leaving the city walls behind, they moved northwest toward the rolling hills of Galilee. With mixed feelings Mary turned for a farewell sight of Jerusalem. It was crouched in the setting sun, tense with terrific vitality. Mary felt a vague fear of its impersonal strength, sensed that her life would some day feel its force. She knew not how nor why, but something within her resisted this vitality, this restless force straining subtly at an invisible leash.

She let her gaze wander over the brown battlements, white-washed houses, flat roofs, slender minarets, many-colored domes reflecting the sun with different degrees of brilliance, and towering above all the Temple and the Palace. The Temple and the Palace, each apparently seeking to dominate the city, yet realizing that as long as the other existed this could not be, and because of this realization, seemed to smile diplomatically at each other. One last look—and then Mary turned her face toward their destination.

They passed through valleys and level plains, the fields green with wheat and barley, and watered by streams descending from the Wadi Farah. Along the road grew balsam trees and thorny jujubes, the latter laden with sweet, insipid fruit. An occasional splash of color from blood-red poppies raised Mary's spirits.

They wound upward past herds of patient cattle and flocks of busy goats. The timid sheep were herded away from the dangers of the highway. The goats always furnished amusement. Some stood on their hind legs, browsing on the foliage of scrub oak; some showed off in butting contests atop a pile of rocks or a cleft along the road, while others with obvious disdain for such behavior sedately pattered along with as much dignity as flapping ears would permit. Eastward behind the hills, Mary could trace the long, vast trench of the Jordan valley, running due north and south, filled with a thin, violet haze and terminating in a glint from the Salt Sea.

At two instances her eyes met Joseph's, and between them flashed a warmth of understanding which swelled her heart with hope for the quality of their coming relationship. One instance was when over a hill floated the high pitched quavering voice of a shepherd singing to his flock; and the other was when a fawn-gray partridge, glistening red and black about the head, clucked like a hen for her scattered brood before whirling away in a low, straight flight, only to circle and return to the same spot where she had left her deserted chicks. This hope for an especial relationship she hugged with feminine anxiety. The quality of the relationship between man and woman, she felt, depended upon the quality of their interests. She had noticed a brightness lurking in Joseph's eyes, as though waiting to illuminate his smile in appreciation of that which caught his interest.

From the quality of that at which she had seen him

smile, she knew this brightness was often brought into play, because, with a lavish hand had been placed in the world those things at which he smiled, but only to a wise and understanding heart were they revealed. Such things as the maternal concern of the partridge hen, and the love for his flock in the shepherd's lilting song.

All the things Elizabeth had told her of this strangely strong man came back to her. Mary felt that his strength was not only of the worldly kind, but also came from his ability to see through and behind the world. Her eyes suddenly filled with tears of gratitude for the security of such a strength. She clutched the swaying sides of her litter to steady herself, whispering a prayer of thankfulness.

In a little grove, sheltered against the winds from across the Jordan Valley and plentifully supplied with water from a spring, Joseph halted the caravan for the night. The attendants unloaded the camels and erected the tents while Mary's mother, Anna, supervised the preparation of their evening meal.

When the fire of dry wood had produced sufficient coals and ash for baking, little disks of meal and oil were put on to bake. At the proper time they were turned, and the result was a crisply delicious ash-cake. These cakes spread with honey comprised the main dish; the simple fare was augmented by cucumbers, figs, olives, raisins and pistachio nuts.

This was the first meal of her new life, Mary realized, as she gazed around her into the silent faces reflecting the flickering firelight. She looked at her

mother, so patient in her fatigue; at her father, his eyes still bright with pride and excitement; at the maidens, prim and a bit perplexed as to what was expected of them; and then at Joseph, poised in his still strength, quietly carving a little figure from a piece of wood. She told herself that all of these people had been brought together at this particular spot as part of the plan of which she was the central figure. Her mother's fatigue, her father's pride, the maidens' perplexity and Joseph's strength were all offerings on the altar of what was expected of her.

The fitfully burning fire, fanned by a playful breeze that found its way around the sheltering hill, caused everything to dance with eerie lights and shadows. Just when Mary was beginning to question the reality of herself and everything else, Anna arose from the fire, a signal for all to retire to their respective tents for the night. Mary followed, conscious at every step of Joseph's awareness of her, although he only nodded without looking up from his carving.

CHAPTER 5

REDISCOVERING the ancestral home of her birth was an experience which absorbed Mary's interest for several days. It was located in the little town of Saf-furiyeh, just below Nazareth.

The building was foursquare with a great vaulted height of finely-hewn stone that had stood since the reign of David, when it had been built as a retreat from the summer heat of the town. Heavy roofed arches rested on massive marble pillars; the high ceilings and thick walls afforded a pleasantly even temperature. Floors were overlaid with cool marble and walls were covered with smooth plaster, some of which were tinted with various shades of vermilion. The rooms enclosed a large court surrounded by cloisters and galleries. In the midst of a landscape of cypresses and olive trees bordered by a hedge of cacti was a well whose water had remained sweet and cool from generation to generation.

Encircling the outside entrance to the house was a forecourt from which stairs of exquisitely carved wood led to the roof. In a secluded corner of the roof Mary found that part of the house which she secretly claimed as her own. Here all the pent-up emotion that was inside her could be released into outward expression, and all the beauty and significance of the outside world could be assimilated within.

From this spot was one of the loveliest views of all Palestine. She suspected the location for the house had been selected because of the view. Westward in a gradual color-changing descent to the Mediterranean rolled the plain of Esdraelon. Stretching southward it dipped into the Valley of Jezreel. Far below, at a distant crossroad, Mary could see creeping caravans of Arabian merchants, glittering legions of Roman soldiers marching along the highway, and the ever-present files of Jewish pilgrims that moved along all roads leading to Jerusalem.

To the north, snug against the side of lofty Jabel Jermak, gleamed the city of Safed; and directly behind her and slightly above, terraced on the shoulder of a prominent Galilean hill, was the town of Nazareth. Stretching in between were undulating grassy knolls, interspersed with blossoms of delicate pink flax, golden chrysanthemums and blue campanulas.

As Mary's eyes rested upon a certain imposing house in Nazareth, belonging to the Prince of the Carpenter Tribe, her heart lifted with warm excitement. The flowers blooming on the hillside between where she stood and this house on Marmion Way in Nazareth seemed to form a bridal path. Soon the wedding festival would take place and then, led by her husband, she would walk through the gentle beauty of these flowers to be presented to the House of the Prince of the Carpenter Tribe.

Try as she might, Mary could never look upon Joseph's house without experiencing a tightness in her throat, a subdued excitement in her heart. She couldn't

determine whether the excitement was due to her coming personal relationship with Joseph, or, to the house as the setting wherein the real drama of her life was to be enacted. In either event, the house itself was a very important entity, which at one time beckoned with warm friendliness, and at another time frowned forbiddingly.

Busy days passed. Every afternoon Mary and the maidens gathered at the cooler north end of the enclosed court to spin the wool into yarns from which would be woven the temple veil. Gradually, in such close companionship and by conscious effort on her part, Mary broke down the reserve of the other maidens. They began spontaneously to include her in their conversations, where before there had been only studied courtesy toward her.

All but Zaele. She continued to be a thorn in Mary's side. Hardly a day went by but that the old resentment she had fought in the Temple was in some way rekindled. Instead of being freed from it when she left the Temple, it came along with her and its recurrence was becoming of grave significance to Mary. To be capable of this feeling of resentment while in the Temple had been bad enough, but to bring it with her into the sanctuary of her own home and toward a guest within its walls was far worse.

The wedding festivities were only a few days distant. The girls spent every moment free from their duties in making the dresses they would wear when the crowds arrived for the ceremony. The bringing together of young men and women at one wedding fes-

tival usually resulted in other weddings. Consequently the skirts and blouses and shawls were receiving much attention.

A sense of competition was inevitable. Alone and in pairs the girls, in secret, prepared their costumes to suit their individual charms. Though still maidens of the Temple, at the age of fourteen they could decide for themselves whether or not they would spend the remainder of their lives in the Temple. Many things might happen at a festival, and it was the part of wisdom to be prepared.

One afternoon Mary felt a strange depression. Unable to throw it off, she decided to go up to the roof and see if solitude and nearness to the sky would help.

As she stood in her special spot, gazing out across the westward rolling plains, she heard voices and giggles. Her attention was arrested because she had always considered her roof retreat sufficiently removed to prevent the hearing of sounds from the house. She discovered that the sounds were coming from a corner of the inner court beneath where she stood. She recognized the low, resonant voice of Zaele and the admiring titter of Rebecca, a negative and colorless girl who had been attracted to Zaele's company by her vitality and physical beauty; it had been natural that they should pair off together.

"Wait until they see this!" Zaele's voice held a note of triumph. Rebecca's answering giggle of approval was a little uncertain.

Mary could not see to what Zaele referred, but sensed it must have something to do with the wedding

costume she had been working on for several days. However, that which came next drove all speculation from her mind.

"They will see!" Zaele's voice continued. "I will have a husband! A rich one, too! And I will not need to own all the land in Palestine to do it!" A quality of contempt crept into her tone. "Neither will I need to have the old ones making prophecies about my giving birth to a Messiah!"

Rebecca's answering snicker was faint and half-frightened at such a daring statement.

"One is expected to believe anything," Zaele continued. "It is even whispered that old Elizabeth is with child, and a holy one at that! But I do not believe it. Neither do I believe Mary is to be mother of a Messiah. The purpose of this wedding is to unite the wealth of the two families of David." Zaele laughed a hard, accusingly prophetic laugh and continued:

"I know the desires of men. I am fourteen next month and I expect to go to a rich husband, not back to the Temple for the remainder of my life!"

Zaele's voice was guttural in its intensity.

"If it were not for her wealth and this absurd Messiah prophecy, Mary could not interest a man like Joseph. Let him have eyes for me and I would know how to cause his eyes to sweep and burn as the breath of Sherkiyeh blowing from the desert!"

Mary's senses reeled. This one girl had tried for years to poison her relation with the other Temple girls, had sought to defame her publicly; had even hurt Elizabeth in many ways. And now did dare to

plan the use of her wiles and beauty to corrupt the wonderful manhood of Joseph! Mary's entire being cried out against the injustice of Zaele's very existence. She was suddenly possessed of a furious desire to destroy this being who seemed interested in naught save the destruction of Mary and all that was noble and dear to her.

Turning, she rushed to the stairs, glancing wildly about for a weapon with which to attack this personification of vileness. From the top railing post of the stairs extended a slender, finely-carved, wooden rod supporting a highly-polished, heavy wooden ball. Mary broke this rod from the post.

Thought of all else but to attack Zaele was driven from her mind. She was a different person, a stranger to herself, an entity created out of the frantic necessity to remove Zaele's influence from her life.

With her raised weapon grasped tightly, she descended the first step. Through the revolving haze of consciousness, Mary heard her name called. She descended two more steps before the Voice penetrated far enough to be recognized. She stopped. Gripping the railing, her slender figure grew rigid.

It was the Voice from the Sun.

"Mary!" again came the Voice.

Mary shook her head as if to remove from her ears the sound of the Voice she loved so dearly. She would never again hear the Voice. That which she was about to do removed her forever from its association and from all its association meant.

"Go away!" she muttered through clenched teeth.

"I would destroy this person who is determined to destroy me and mine. Spare me the sound of your voice!" she pleaded. "I have failed you! Utterly and miserably have I failed you!"

In response to the drive of her anger she descended another step.

"Though I have failed your purpose," she continued in desperate tones, "I still must punish this girl. She has taken my all, leaving naught to my life but a husk of rebellious resentment."

Again came the Voice from the Sun. "To be tempted is not a sign of weakness. Temptation is as close to man as the air he breathes. It is the substance of which his road is made, and only over this road is progress made!"

At the next step Mary stopped as the Voice continued:

"Temptation provides grain for the mill of our will. It is the shield against which we test the strength of our sword; the cloth to which we apply the measuring rod of our wisdom; it supplies adventure to the divine conquest of living. Without temptation upon which to place our feet there would be no heights to climb."

Mary descended another step, then she paused as the Voice spoke again.

"It is not expected that man live without error, but he is expected to profit by his mistakes. Bring not forward the past to plague the future, but convert all experience into understanding."

Mary had reached the bottom step.

The Voice seemed nearer and clearer.

"Judgment belongs to the law of the universe. Vengeance is mine says the Law of the Lord. When we judge our fellowman, as you are judging Zaele, we move in the domain which belongs to the Lord.

"Judge not lest you be judged by the Law. Remember this, my child, to judge not is the only path to peace. See Zaele for what she is, a vigorous young creature, caught in the snare of her zest for living; she is far more subject to temptation than you. Through your own temptation you should understand hers, not condemn it."

The Voice suddenly became so gentle that Mary fell into a sobbing heap upon the bottom landing of the steps. The weapon dropped from her hand and rolled away.

The Voice continued with infinite kindness, "Do not feel that all is ruined. Go forth from here as we have planned. Judge Zaele no more for her transgressions; they are but weaknesses which the law will convert into strength!"

"I will try!" sobbed Mary. "I will try!"

CHAPTER 6

THE MARRIAGE CEREMONY held in Mary's ancestral home was over. In the upper room the betrothed pair had stood beneath a canopy as Halhul, High Priest of the Temple, finished the ritual he had begun in Jerusalem. The crowns Mary and Joseph wore had been exchanged several times. They had pledged each other in new wine, after which the marriage contract had been read and attested to by each person present in the passing of the wine cup. Following this ceremony, their friends had walked around the canopy, chanting psalms and showering rice upon the couple, after which Halhul had concluded the ritual by invoking the seven blessings upon them.

Night had arrived, the time for Joseph to lead her to his house up the hill, before Mary could bring any sense of reality into the day's activity. All her life she had looked forward to this day's ceremony, yet during the rites she had felt so detached that she could hardly believe it was actually happening.

But now that she and Joseph stood outside the walls of her home, awaiting the procession of friends and relatives that would accompany them to Joseph's house for the feast, her detachment dropped away and she was acutely conscious of several things.

She would never again enter her own home except as a guest; and henceforth the maintenance of

Joseph's house and its traditions would be her responsibility. Also she was keenly aware of Joseph's presence. Once more she felt the potency of his subtle strength. A gentle evening breeze stirred his white robe, accentuating his tall, slender frame. His dark eyes glowed in the soft lights of the stars.

Those who bore the hymeneal lamps arrived, Joseph touched Mary's arm, and over the soft grass of the rolling hills they led the procession toward the ancestral home of the Carpenter Tribe.

The swinging lamps cast reeling shafts of yellow light. Where their light penetrated the darkness near her feet, Mary watched for one of the blossoms she had seen from the roof of her house. She knew that most of them would have folded their delicate petals for the night, but she wanted so desperately to see one along the way. When she looked at them before, she saw them as being there especially for her bridal path, and now she felt she must see one. The farther she walked the more intent became her search until her desire became superstitious in its intensity. It was an omen she sought.

She could feel Joseph's awareness of her distraction. He slowed his pace and turned questioningly toward her, but she continued her search.

Suddenly the lamplight reflected a golden chrysanthemum directly in her path. As she passed, its color and shape was a miniature sun shining through the darkness.

With new enthusiasm she quickened her step, confident she had seen her omen!

The house of Joseph, Prince of the Carpenter Tribe, was similar to the house she has just left. Lighted lamps bordered the huge enclosed court. Against one entire wall was a table laden with food. From the other side of the wide court came music.

The music thrilled Mary deeply. Never before had she heard so many skilled musicians in one group. She stole a glance at Joseph. He must have gathered them from far and wide out of consideration for her love of music.

Even though he pretended to be interested in another direction, Mary knew he was watching her reaction to the musicians. A wave of warm appreciation swept over her. She had known he was strong, gentle and wise, but now she knew he was thoughtful of her happiness as well. Much effort had been necessary to gather so many musicians.

She moved over, and standing in front of him, looked up into his face.

"It makes me very happy," her voice was low and unsteady, "that the first words I speak to my husband are words of gratitude for his thoughtfulness. The music is glorious!"

Joseph smiled down at her without replying. She had never seen such a smile. His face scarcely moved, but tiny lights flashed in his eyes and then swarmed together to make a warm, mellow glow. He took her hand and led her to an elevated bench against the center wall between the feast table and the music. There they seated themselves, watching as the guests moved about the court.

Mary looked about at the happy, expectant faces. On a bench opposite her sat the aged, an expression of eagerness struggling through the dimness of their eyes. She knew within the house were rooms filled with babes and children. And milling in the court in ever-increasing numbers were the youths and the middle-aged.

The vests and veils of young women vied with the jackets and girdles of young men in embroidery and ornamentation. Beneath the strut of youth and the shyness of maid was an increasing holiday spontaneity and recklessness.

The musicians departed from the feast table and returned to their instruments. Mary was fascinated by the variety of instruments. There were hand-drums, kettle-drums, and tambourines; many types of flutes, and various stringed instruments that included lyres and zithers.

The leader, a large man with a luxuriantly flowing beard, approached the bench where Mary and Joseph sat. Bowing low he spoke to Joseph:

"Gracious host, it would be a great honor if we could accompany your wife in song."

Joseph turned to Mary.

Eagerly she accepted. The leader commanded silence. In a warm, rich voice to the accompaniment of a well-known folk melody, Mary sang one of her favorite songs of David:

"The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"

She resumed her seat; and after a moment of appreciative silence, the music was resumed in a more festive rhythm.

The psalm Mary had just sung now had for her a newer and clearer meaning. She realized that that which she had always feared—her own reactions—she now feared no longer. Deliberately she thought of Zaele to test herself. Sympathy was her only reaction. Great was Mary's joy.

Some of the people were beginning to move in harmony with the cadence and rhythm of the music. Dancing was a personal expression, an interpretation of what the music meant to the individual. Some merely swayed, while others were more active in their interpretations.

In a far corner of the court one dancer was attracting much attention. At first Mary could not see through the crowd, but as the dancer's abandon increased the crowd spread out to allow more room. Presently the dancer was in front of Mary's bench.

It was Zaele! As Mary looked at the girl's costume she instantly understood why she had mistaken the dancer for a man. Brazenly Zaele had defied the modesty of women's mode of dress. Instead of a loosely fitting vest and skirt covered by a concealing robe, she wore no robe; her vest was body-tight, and the seductive lines of her swaying hips were clearly revealed by the closely draped skirt.

A wave of pity arose in Mary as she watched Zaele. There was no element of criticism or judgment in her attitude but rather an awakened understanding. In

every motion and gesture of the dance, Mary could see Zaele's defiance of a world attempting to withhold happiness from her. Mary knew the purpose of the revealing costume was to display to the world the quality of physical charm Zaele could offer in return for that which she wanted, wanted with all the vigor of her frustrated femininity.

Mary's compassion increased as Zaele's dance continued. The spectators, having satisfied their curiosity, were careful not to show interest to a degree that might be suspected of approval.

Mary glanced at Joseph. He was on the edge of his seat, staring incredulously at Zaele's performance. A tremendous sigh of heavy reluctance shook his frame as he arose and signalled the musicians to cease playing. As master of the house it was his duty to stop this young girl's ceremony of self-destruction, but judgment and punishment must come from the father, or, in the case of this Temple maid, from the high priest.

Halhul was on hand, and he stepped forth from the stilled crowd. Having spent her emotion with the dance, Zaele stood frightened and bewildered at the unexpected result of her plans. Halhul's voice reverberated through the stilled court:

"According to law, a woman who publicly exposes herself to attract a husband, becomes the property of the public and as such is ostracised. If a man then marries her he shares her ostracism and is refused the privilege of Temple worship!"

With each word Zaele's brazen confidence visibly changed to fear—frantic, desolate fear. Life had be-

trayed her. Spurring her on with the intensity of her desires, life had led her into a trap, there forsaking her. Deserted and defrauded, she awaited she knew not what.

The solemn resonance of Halhul's voice again accentuated the unnatural hush of the throng.

"You have outraged the sanctity and dignity of woman's estate. Consequently the privilege of woman's estate is denied you. Henceforth the street shall be your home, and if any man take you as his wife the gates of the Temple will be closed to him!"

Zaele's dark eyes opened wide with horror. Frantically she stared about like a wild animal at bay; then she crumpled into a hopeless heap, just a child lying in the center of the huge, silent crowd.

The pounding of Mary's heart was so violent it shook her chair. She could understand how Zaele's resentment toward her restricted life had grown until it became a thing alive, demanding to be reckoned with. Had not her own experience been similar?

She touched Joseph's arm. He turned to her, and deep within his luminous eyes she saw pity for what was taking place.

"Is there no other way?" she asked.

Slowly Joseph shook his head and answered, "Only if the wife of a household should take her as handmaid, assuming full responsibility for her conduct.

"That provision of the law is seldom used, because wives hesitate to subject their husbands to the proximity of women who have been proved so unscrupulous.

But since the law is for the protection of women, it also provides for the possibility of women's clemency."

Deliberately Mary recalled what Zaele had said she would do if Joseph should look at her. The memory stirred no resentment. She had no fear of Zaele's presence in her home. And what was most important to Mary, she felt no judgment toward Zaele for any of the things she had ever done.

Her fingers tightened on Joseph's arm and in a voice husky with sincerity she asked, "May I bring this maid into your home? It was to accompany me she was first sent from the Temple, and in some way I may be to blame for that which she has done."

Joseph only stared at her, nodding his assent, but his countenance was radiantly eloquent of the admiration he felt for this maiden wife of his.

Instantly Mary stepped down from their pedestalled seat. Hurrying to the huddled figure of Zaele she lifted her to her feet.

Zaele raised her head. Seeing Mary, her eyes widened with a new fear that Mary was, in some way, about to inflict upon her a well-earned vengeance.

Mary's smile melted Zaele's fear and incredulity moved into her glazed, staring eyes. "Fear not, and come with me!" Mary encouraged gently. Her arms about Zaele, she led her across the court toward the main part of the house. Zaele, her head upon Mary's shoulder, wept in bewildered despair. The spellbound guests murmured in their astonishment.

* * *

It was the hour preceding dawn before Joseph ac-

accompanied Mary to her chamber in the woman's wing, and departed to attend to his many duties as host.

Her room was large and comfortable. Against one wall, between two latticed windows, stood a canopied bedstead.

Through the latticed squares of the windows wafted the cool, fresh breath of a budding day.

Hurriedly and gratefully Mary accepted the invitation of her luxurious bed, snuggling deep into its crisp caress, and encouraging her thoughts to review the significance and color of the preceding events.

Having put Zaele to bed and consoled her as much as anyone in her plight could be consoled, she had returned to her place beside Joseph.

The emotional climax, witnessed by the people, had held them in restraint for a while. But soon the music overcame their caution, and the festival had reached a delightful height of enjoyment.

Now as Mary became aware of the strengthening dawn she sensed in it a strangely palpable tenderness. Remembering the expression in Joseph's eyes as he left her, she wondered if the tenderness of the morn did not come from her own thoughts instead of through the windows.

In either event, she was grateful for the gentle understanding of her splendid husband.

"Poor Zaele!" she sighed aloud, and shuddered at the thought of her own battle with resentment, hoping her present victory was a permanent one.

With incredible clearness she remembered Elizabeth's words on the subject:

"Yes, my child," she had said, "the mother must indeed be found worthy! The quality of the mother's influence is the soil in which the seed is to grow. For, as a seedling, it is bound by that which binds all seedlings. Else its life would not demonstrate that which all seedlings are capable of attaining!"

Suddenly Mary's room was filled with a soft yellow light! Light that streamed in vibrant shafts through the latticed windows.

Quickly arising and grasping the lattice-work she stared into the inflowing light. The upper tip of the sun was just visible over the hills of Galilee. From this glowing segment on the horizon, across the intervening space, came a gleaming golden cord of light, its pulsating length stretching from the sun's tip to Mary's room, as though at those two terminals the golden cord was fastened.

The question Mary had been pondering when the light suddenly appeared was answered by a voice coming from within her room.

"Fear not, Mary," it said, "for God has found you worthy!"

Trembling with awe Mary released the lattice and prostrated herself humbly upon the floor. Always before the Voice had come from the distant Sun. Now it was in her very room. But it was not the same Voice; a quality of infinite gentleness was missing. The Voice spoke again.

"Behold! I bring the Light of the World which you shall conceive in your womb. When it is brought forth you shall call his name Jesus!"

"He shall be great, the son of the Highest, and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David.

"And he shall reign over the House of Jacob forever, and of his Kingdom there shall be no end."

Infinite humbleness overwhelmed Mary. Her entire life had been directed toward this moment. Desperately she desired that naught within herself be lacking. Meekly she asked:

"How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?"

Instantly the Voice answered:

"With God nothing is impossible. Your cousin Elizabeth conceived a son in her old age, even though she was called barren! And this is the sixth month with her!"

Now Mary knew why the Voice was different. This was not her Voice from the Sun, but that of the Angel Gabriel who had appeared to Zacharias.

"The Holy Ghost shall come upon you, and the Light of the Highest shall overshadow you, and this holy thing which shall be born of you shall be called the Son of God.

"And this Son of God, being born as man, shall demonstrate man's dominion over life and death!"

Mary lifted herself to her knees and with her head still bowed in humbleness said:

"Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to your words!"

Then she felt the departure of Gabriel, but the light which he had brought remained within her room.

Slowly this light began to move. Around the room

in a circle it moved, spinning faster and faster. As the light spun the circle became smaller and brighter until it became an inverted golden cone suspended above Mary. Lower and lower descended the spinning, golden vortex. When the golden cone of light reached Mary its outline disappeared and Mary was enveloped in light. She felt as though her being were composed of a myriad of tiny candles all of which were suddenly lighted. Upon the sweep of their combined flame she seemed to soar higher and higher until she was swept into the realm of unconsciousness.

CHAPTER 7

MARY AWAKENED in her bed. She did not remember returning there from the floor. But this was insignificant compared to the change she discovered in herself.

The living, spinning cone of light now living in her body so affected it that she was unconscious of weight. She felt transparent, as fluid as the atmosphere. Light flowed through her, and she was light.

Enriched and revitalized, she also possessed new clarity of vision. Clearness of understanding enabled her to see in everything and everyone an affinity of purpose. This subtle integrity present in all life and form established in her heart an unfathomable peace.

Glancing at the window she judged it to be mid-morning. Suddenly she wanted to look upon the outside world with this new understanding, to see the familiar through the eyes of her new and unfamiliar self.

She would go to the roof. Hurriedly she began dressing. Here in her new home she would find another roof sanctuary just as she had at the Temple and her mother's home.

Quietly she made her way to the roof. The house was still. No indication of the night's hilarity marred the sparkling brilliance of the morning. A high, stone balustrade rose above the roof's edge. At its eastern cor-

ner she stood, her face as clear and bright as the world upon which she looked.

Eagerly she drank in what she saw. Within all lived a new beauty and meaning. The green hills of Galilee, rolling away as far as she could see, gave her a sense of friendly comfort. The white homes of Nazareth, huddling together in neighborly clusters, tugged sweetly at her heart.

All that she looked upon was an extension of herself. She was part of it and it part of her. In this affinity was a purpose; and that purpose was good, the result of the Creator's love for His creation.

Mary's being was aglow with the light living within her. For an instant the old fear returned. True, she had been found worthy to bear this wondrous babe, but it would be her responsibility to guide his growth through childhood to manhood so that he would attain the heights prophesied of him. Could she do it? Surely all this divine preparation could not be lost through her inadequacy as a mother!

Shaking her head to remove such thoughts she again drank in the beautiful world spread out around her. Someone moved in the court below. She recognized the slender, dignified figure of Joseph as he inspected the results of the night's activity.

Mary was seized with an impelling desire to share her glorious secret with him. Gathering up her skirts, she raced down the steps and out across the grassy court to him. He turned with perplexed pleasure at her approach.

Her face shone so with the joy of her tidings that

Joseph was astonished to see in her a quality of beauty which had hitherto escaped him.

"Compared to you the brilliance of the morning is dull and lifeless," he smiled down into her beaming, upturned face.

"Oh, Joseph," she whispered rapturously, "I am with child!"

Incredulous, he stared at Mary. The girl spoke with amazing simplicity and directness. No woman was ever more proud, more free from shame! Could it be she did not know the significance of her announcement? Had the Temple been so absorbed in sheltering her from minor transgressions that it failed to acquaint her with so serious an act?

Searching her face, Joseph sought for some indication of shame, some plea for forgiveness, some petition for pity, a pretext or excuse. But he saw only pride and joy such as he had never seen before.

This grotesque turn of events assailing him so abruptly robbed him of reason. His mind was stunned, his heart anguished. Mumbling an excuse he moved himself from her presence. Hurrying to the privacy of his chambers he turned the wooden key in the huge door as though this act could lock away a suddenly distorted world. Pacing back and forth he sought a possible explanation. It was obvious that his young wife felt she had done no wrong, for he had never see a face more free from a sense of guilt. It must be that in her limited life in the Temple she had been uninformed of the attitude of the outside world toward such things. If he pointed out to her the extent of her transgression

he would first have to introduce to her a side and quality of life which for her did not exist.

A burning question clutched his wise and just heart as back and forth he strode. Suddenly he stepped to the window, gripped the lattice and with eyes heavenward cried aloud in anguish, "Which would be the greater sin on my part? To reveal the ugliness of life to a soul as fresh and clean as her's merely for the privilege of pointing out her guilt, or, permit her to continue living in her present world? The purity of which is reflected by the brightness of her face!"

For hours Joseph wrought with this question. Not until the day was almost spent did he reach his decision. He would not expose Mary to herself! By living privily within his house she could retain the beauty of her world, and with a little effort on his part she could be protected from the ugliness of his world.

Utterly exhausted he threw himself upon his bed to sleep. Through the same window at which he had pled for an answer to his question there suddenly streamed the rays of the setting sun. A Voice spoke in reassuring tones:

"Joseph, son of David, fear not to take unto yourself Mary, your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.

"She shall bring forth a son, and you will call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins!"

The light faded, the Voice ceased. Joseph sprang to his feet. He was afire with what he had heard. Never had he known greater joy.

The prophecy of Isaiah was suddenly framed in his mind in flaming letters:

“Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.”

Why had he not thought of it before? Had it not been Mary’s destiny from the beginning? And when it had happened, she had hurried to him to share with him its holy significance. He had turned from her, leaving her alone. He had spent the day in weighing judgment against her for an imagined crime against his masculine pride. What could she have thought? Where was she now?

Groaning, repentant to the depths of his soul, he groped blindly for the key and threw wide the door. Stumbling across the court, he ran up the stairs to the door of Mary’s chamber.

Hesitating but an instant, he pushed open the door and hurried to her side. Seeing her lying there safe he was overcome with relief and self-condemnation.

He dropped to his knees and rested his head upon her bed. His voice was hoarse with anguish.

“Holy Mother, forgive me. Henceforth my life will be lived for you. Blessed am I to be husband to you and your holy son!”

Mary’s hands touched his head, her voice low with joy and gladness.

“Blessed are we to have you for our husband and father!”

* * * *

As the days passed, Mary grew in understanding as

a rose unfolds its petals, a flower evolving toward the time when its perfume would enrich a waiting world with divine fragrance.

More and more she became aware of her tremendous task. Her son must be so guided in the beginning of his earthly life that no human frailties would blight his divine fruition. He must grow from infancy to maturity; must go through the same trials and limitations as all men. How else could he experience man's lower self? In no other way could he test the fetters of the flesh. If he were not subjected to the temptations of human nature, how could he overcome that which was temporal and free that which is eternal? It was Mary's task to guide him until that which was infinite penetrated that which was finite—until the seedling pushing through the soil came into the light of the sun.

The magnitude of such a great responsibility appalled Mary; and at times the strange profundity of her thoughts frightened her. She hungered for the comforting presence of Elizabeth. She had promised that when first she felt life within her she would go to Elizabeth. So she decided to ask Joseph for his permission.

"Joseph," she said, "at this time I desire the companionship of my cousin Elizabeth, and she might have need of me. I beg your permission to journey to her home in Hebron."

Joseph nodded with quiet understanding.

"Preparations will be made at once."

Turning to depart, he paused and with obvious difficulty asked, "Is it your wish to go alone?"

The only reply he received was a look of sweet disapproval for such an unwonted suggestion that sped him on to see that the preparations were speedily and happily made.

When the caravan was ready, Mary noted that there were two extra pack camels besides the usual one for each traveler. Joseph observed her look of mild astonishment and quickly busied himself with the trappings. Mary's heart sang as she ascended into her litter, for she knew the extra camels were laden with Joseph's conception of what might add to the comfort along the journey.

Leisurely they descended the hills of Galilee, and before nightfall pitched their tents near Jacob's Well, at the mouth of the Shechem Valley.

Reclining on several rugs carefully piled by Joseph beneath the flap of her tent, Mary, having finished her evening meal, watched the changing colors of the setting sun move across Mt. Gerizim, sacred mountain of the Samaritans.

Long ago, upon that mountain the Samaritans had built their Temple of Worship. A hundred years before Mary's time the Jews had climbed the mount and destroyed the Samaritan's temple. Mary mused on the futility of man constantly destroying the symbol of another's faith. With her new power of insight she understood it was man's lack of confidence in his own faith which caused him to destroy the evidence of another's faith; fear that the other's might be more potent than his own.

The next afternoon the caravan passed through the

Damascus Gate and entered the City of Jerusalem. They made their way to the ancestral home of Mary's father. There they were greeted by Anna and Joachim, who were spending a few weeks in the city.

Leaving Joseph with her parents, Mary departed for the Temple, the imposing edifice in which she had spent so many impressionable years. She was astonished to find that the steps she now climbed were just highly polished slabs of marble and the towering columns and lofty ceilings were but magnificent masonry. It was incredible that this had been the background of such unhappiness; that its previous significance had weighed so heavily upon the limited perspective of her youth. She had thought today's mission would be attended by hesitation and misgivings, but she felt not a single qualm.

For days she had watched Zaele's changing attitude; from her own experience she knew that such changes were possible. Zaele should not be condemned for the rest of her life because of an adolescent indiscretion. The stream of her life was exceedingly strong. In her youth the guiding banks were indefinite and unstable. Because the stream once over-ran its banks, its force should not forever be doomed to the lonely wastes of the desert!

Halhul's old eyes shone with pleasure at the sight of Mary as he observed the obvious changes wrought in her. However, his manner became reserved and cautious when Mary mentioned Zaele.

"She has harmed no one," Mary insisted. "She is guilty of naught but permitting the gushing fountain

of her youth to spill its waters into certain pools, pools over which the tradition of man has placed the sign of pollution."

Mary touched the sleeve of Halhul's sacred robe and gazed earnestly into his face.

"The fountain of her life still flows, and the real guilt will lie with those who in their judgment say that naught but impure waters can come from this fount!"

For a long moment Halhul thought in silence, then a deep sigh stirred the majesty of his beard.

"Such wisdom is as pure as the light in your eyes. The guidance of her life was in the keeping of the Temple—therefore, the guilt lies with us."

Mary smiled her gratitude.

"I hoped you would permit her to return, for even though she has not expressed this wish, I feel it is her desire."

As Mary left the pious patriarch she felt his eyes seeking the reason for the change he found in her. To-day he saw a woman, wise in the ways of the world, but who a few weeks before was an inexperienced Temple maid. But Mary felt that even from him must be kept her secret until her time was come.

As she left the Temple, her secret of secrets, her trysts with the Sun, weighed upon her with a new degree of intensity. It was one thing to give birth to this man who, according to the prophets was to receive the throne of David, reign over the house of Jacob, and free the Jews from their enemies; but it was another thing to give birth to him who would overcome death.

Never before in the history of her people had this been done by man.

She forced herself to stop and look at this creature, man, as he passed to and fro. For the first time she felt as a witness to life's activity, an impersonal bystander. All who passed indicated by their manner that they moved toward some purpose, their faces reflecting an anxiety over the outcome of this purpose.

Once, Mary had seen a caged lion. She never forgot its constant, restless pacing to and fro within the confines of its cage—pacing that took it nowhere. Mary knew now that the lion had paced because of an undeniable urge for motion, and even though it got nowhere this fundamental urge had been satisfied. Thus the lion had attained a limited measure of peace within his environment.

The throngs she passed now paced within cages made of various desires. Frantically individuals moved toward desires, only to have the desires change before their very eyes, sending them off just as frantically in new directions. Because the desires were always changing there could be no rest from the seeking. So the only difference between man and the lion was the size of the cage. Both were satisfying the divine urge, to grow, to develop, to evolve; appeasing the urge, but not accomplishing that for which the urge existed.

No longer did these new experiences in thought and understanding disturb Mary. It was as if such things had always been known to her, but heretofore had been hidden in another room of her mind, a room

into which she had now entered through the door of that which lived within her womb.

Reaching the entrance to her mother's home she paused atop the steps and with pity in her heart turned once more toward the throngs hurrying back and forth within the cages of changing desires.

"There is no one to show them the way out of their cages," she murmured to herself. And then answering herself she said with a strange conviction, "My son shall be their way!"

Dawn of the next day found them crossing the head of the deep valley of Hinnom, on the road to Bethlehem, whose name means the city of bread; spiritual bread. Throughout the valley were cultivated fields that appeared as patches of varying shades of red interspersed with the greens of mulberry, hawthorne and fig trees.

At mid-morning they rested at the Mar Elias Well, and soon thereafter the double hill of Bethlehem came into view, surrounded by gardens, olive orchards, green fields and pastures.

In front of a large inn, in the center of Bethlehem, Joseph stopped the caravan. At sight of the building Mary thrilled from head to foot. Though she had never seen it before, she recognized it as the birthplace of David whose throne her son was to inherit. It had been the home of Boaz, and when David became king he built a fortress over it. In course of time it had become an inn, half of which was endowed to entertain, without charge, teachers and priests from other lands; the remaining half was leased by Mary's family to another

family who rented rooms to the public for a livelihood.

As if reading her thoughts, Joseph announced:

"At this very spot David was crowned King of the Shepherds. The shepherds were so delighted that David was fair, a ruddy child of the sun, that their songs of praise filled the heavens and they placed upon his golden curls a crown of spun silver and wool."

Mary remembered the words of Samuel: "For he was ruddy and fair, and withal of beautiful countenance, and goodly to look upon."

The inn had a strangely magnetic attraction for her, a sweetly gentle but insistent pull. Reluctantly she left the inn behind as they set out on the last stage of their journey.

For the remainder of the day Mary day-dreamed about the inn as David's birthplace, and of the shepherds and their songs of joy. Occasionally, however, her attention would be claimed by the beauty of the passing country—the corn fields of Boaz, the bright green of almond trees, the dark green of carob trees, snowy blossoms of apricot or the rosy bloom of peach trees. And as an overtone to it all came the friendly, mellow greetings of the meadow larks, heralding their approach to each new scene.

Toward evening the trail wound up through wilder, rockier heights, leading past the great empty pools of Solomon, lying at the head of Wadi Artas. On the southern slopes of the heights they made their camp, beside one of the gushing springs of Wadi-al-Arrub, whose waters formed a laughing brook rushing at random through the valley below.

An early moon bathed the stilled earth in its soft light. Mary and Joseph reclined among their woven rugs, and gazed out over the unfolded magic of the night. Upon a gentle breeze was borne to them the quavering notes of a shepherd's flute. Mary thrilled to the plaintive song and her reveries turned again to David and his shepherds.

She settled deeper into her rugs. "Tell me more of this tribe of men called the Shepherds," she implored softly.

Joseph arose to throw a large gnarled root upon the fire, then comfortably settled himself among his rugs and explained:

"The calling of the Shepherds is a noble one. The owner of many herds is a prince, a priest, a shepherd of men as well as sheep. He carries the Royal Crook, the same emblem carried by Egyptian kings to indicate that they were rulers of the two kingdoms of Egypt."

"Do not all shepherds carry a crook?" Mary asked.

"The common shepherd has a staff, but the staff has not the royal crook. The prince divides his herds into flocks of one hundred each and places them in the care of a shepherd.

"This shepherd names each of the sheep and talks to them as though they were his children. He talks to the goat who leads them and the dog who drives and protects them, as though they were his brothers."

"Do the sheep, in turn, look to the shepherd as their father?" Mary inquired hopefully.

Joseph nodded his head in solemn emphasis.

"They understand him, and look to him for all

their needs. They know his voice and if he calls, no matter how they may be mixed up with other sheep in their grazing, they will turn at once and come to him."

"Do many get lost?"

"Yes, but the shepherd seeks until the lost one is found. When one is lost the whole of the little flock mourns, and many will not eat until he is found."

Mary noticed a growing huskiness in Joseph's voice as he continued.

"It is beautiful to see the joy of the ninety-nine when the lost one is returned to them. The dog barks with joyous reproof; and the goat, by leaping over the highest promontories, shows that he, too, is happy."

Joseph became silent. For a long time Mary refrained from disturbing him. Then, with sincere concern, she asked:

"Those who grow old and weak must be killed?"

It was some time before Joseph answered. When he did there was a hardness in his tone.

"Only the little sacrificial lambs are killed."

Mary knew the unwonted harshness came from his intolerance of animal sacrifice, and a gladness stirred within her. When again he spoke, his voice resumed its normal gentleness.

"Hunger he will endure before the shepherd will kill his sheep. In his own mouth does he chew the oil and meal, and with it feed the ones that have become old and toothless. The same thing he does for the motherless lambs until they grow strong enough to graze.

"If blind, he brings them water in a cup running

over. He leads the others to where he can dam the stream and provide for them a pool of still water."

"Why must this be done?" Mary asked.

"The nose of the sheep is long. If the water is rough it gets into his nostrils. They are so timid they will not attempt to drink rough water."

"How wonderful!" Mary sighed. "Is there more?"

Joseph smiled deeply.

"Yes, if they are injured, the injured spot is rubbed with an ointment. And in summer, if the heat is intense, to prevent sunstroke, the shepherd anoints their heads with oil."

A psalm of David's which began, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want," suddenly stood forth in Mary's mind.

King of the Shepherds David truly was! Only the King would have understood God's relation to man in terms of a shepherd.

Mary's heart beat rapidly with a new wonder. Her son was to inherit David's throne, to be King of the Shepherd Tribe. What a glorious heritage! This new understanding brought to her by Joseph, contributed still another quality of significance to this life which lived within her.

With deeper peace than she had ever experienced she stretched herself out to sleep. Just before sleep enfolded her she remembered tomorrow she would see Elizabeth. Anticipation spread a mantle of joy over the depths of this new peace.

CHAPTER 8

MIDMORNING FOUND Mary and Joseph approaching Hebron, oldest city in Palestine, and often called Abraham's Castle. Ascending its verdant vale, high enough above sea-level to escape the destructive heat of summer, they passed heavily fruited vineyards stretching as far as the eye could see.

Much of this fertile land was of the House of Asher, and as such belonged to Elizabeth and Zacharias.

Besides being the home of Elizabeth, Hebron held another significance for Mary. David had spent much time here—probably rode a magnificent charger over this same road her camel now trod with such resigned dignity. Twice here David had been anointed King, and for seven and a half years had reigned from Hebron as King of Judah. During this reign, six sons had been born to him, one of whom, Absalom, later chose this, his birthplace, as headquarters for a rebellion.

An attendant at the gate of the outer court surrounding Elizabeth's magnificent home signalled their arrival to the household, and immediately there followed the hurried patter of many feet in joyful preparation for their reception.

Mary was stirred by a strange excitement. As was the custom Elizabeth would wait to welcome her guests in the reception chamber. Mary pictured Elizabeth as last she saw her and wondered if it were possible that

she had grown more glorious in grace and bearing. A surge of love and esteem for this wonderful woman, her cousin, swept over Mary and she was suddenly athirst for her presence. Their love for each other was now divinely sealed by the common purpose of the holy lives within their wombs.

Surrounded by many willing hands and bright, expectant faces they dismounted within the court. Joseph approached Mary and the understanding within his smile that shone down upon her caused her to wonder if he had not felt her very thoughts. And when he spoke she was certain of it. He said:

“Go and greet Elizabeth. I must remain a while to attend my animals.”

Mary marvelled at the guilelessness in his noble face, for she knew the animals needed no more care than that provided by their attendants. With exquisite understanding for her feminine feelings he was providing a private meeting for her and Elizabeth. Also, she knew, if Zacharias was home, Joseph would first be presented to him; and Joseph would manage that their greeting be a lengthy one.

Servants stationed along the way, alert with courteous faces and interested eyes, indicated to Mary the direction to where Elizabeth waited.

At the end of a cool corridor Mary descended several steps into a spacious reception room. Elizabeth stood in its center, her hands outstretched in sweet impatience. For an instant Mary was stunned by the radiance of Elizabeth's countenance and recognized with-

in its unearthly glow the divine significance of the babe she was soon to bear.

"Peace, beloved cousin!" Mary whispered across the handsomely furnished room, now stilled with a palpable hush of expectancy.

At the sound of Mary's voice Elizabeth painfully clutched her side and was so faint she fell to her knees. But before Mary could reach her Elizabeth released her side and still upon her knees held forth her arms and cried in a voice deep with joyous conviction.

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! At the sound of your voice, the babe in my womb leaped with joy!"

The sight of Elizabeth on her knees—Elizabeth, the wise and wonderful,—caused Mary discomfort. Quickly but gently Mary lifted her to her feet and supporting her precious form with her abundant strength led her to a rug covered bench. There they sat in awed silence—each absorbed in the sheer sweetness of their reunion.

Elizabeth's shining eyes revealed the new glory she saw in Mary. She repeated in a significant whisper, "At the sound of your voice, my babe leaped with joy!"

Mary nodded, her tone was reverent as she said:

"Yes, the two holy ones recognized each other's presence."

Elizabeth's incredulity at Mary's understanding was obvious. Seeing it, Mary said in a sweet, low voice, "Once you prophesied that all generations would call me blessed. Now that the Lord has made of me his

handmaiden, thereby fulfilling your prophecy, why are you so astonished?"

Slowly and thoughtfully Elizabeth answered:

"It is one thing to prophesy, but another to witness its fulfillment. Prophecy is a gift, like the gift of sight; it is independent of one's control. Consequently its fulfillment is just as surprising to me as to another."

She laughed musically, declaring, "When last I saw you I was the counselor and you the child; now it is I who am the child and you the counselor!"

They both laughed with a strange elation.

Then Mary said quietly, "We but lost the child and found another counselor; and henceforth counselors we must be, since it was this role for which we were chosen—to guide our sons in the first steps of their journey across the stage of man's estate."

Nodding her head Elizabeth added:

"Through many lives, ours and others, were we prepared for this responsibility. And to ALL LIFE are we obligated to discharge it wisely and faithfully."

For a few moments they were both stilled by the significance of the lives enbosomed within them. But such thoughts were too overwhelming to be prolonged. Soon they were chatting as two ordinary women about their husbands, Joseph and Zacharias.

* * * *

The days passed pleasantly. Mary and Elizabeth were mostly alone, talking and making preparations for their approaching time. This left Joseph and Zacharias with the necessity of each other's entertainment. In the past it had been impossible for them to be together very

long without displaying the divergence of their feelings concerning the popular temple ceremony of animal sacrifice. Now that they were more closely associated than ever before it was natural that their differences should be accentuated.

Zacharias could not speak so he sat at his writing table and wrote on the palimpsest. Joseph stood at his side that he might read what he wrote. If the ink were blotted while it was still wet the same sheet could be used over and over again.

Each day they would begin by Joseph chatting amiably about different subjects, his words designed, as much as possible, to enable Zacharias to answer with a gesture or a single written word. However, eventually the question of animal sacrifice would filter through their studied avoidance, and Joseph's words and Zacharias' quill would begin scratching at old wounds.

This particular morning found Zacharias almost violent in his resentment. He scratched so furiously that the blotting was forgotten and his papyrus supply threatened. The pen scratched spitefully in his clenched hand as he wrote:

"Halhul must have been obsessed of Satan to chose a religious radical for the husband of our Messiah's mother!"

Though Joseph's face was pale and his eyes exceedingly bright, his manner was calm and deliberate.

Zacharias' pen scratched scornfully again, "A man who is not even permitted to enter the temple any farther than the Gentiles' Court should not have been

chosen as husband of the woman who is to bring forth the King of the Jews!"

Throwing down his pen, he leaned back in his chair, shaking his splendid head in righteous indignation.

Joseph stepped around to where he could face Zacharias and declared bluntly, "Perhaps a radical was chosen that he might show this King of the Jews how to escape the quicksands of Jewish dogma. How could anyone caught in the brutal bigotry of your pomp and parade be aware of its diabolical effect upon the people? Much less do something about it! He would be as blinded as you!"

With fingers trembling with rage, Zacharias retrieved his pen and wrote:

"Who are you to criticise our temple rites? You who have no temple in which to worship and whose religion is without history or record!"

Joseph read, then placing his hand upon his breast, replied,

"My body is the only temple I need: Solomon's Temple, built without sound of hammer and saw. Within this temple I feel the wings of my soul. In this temple I worship the grace and beauty of our creator's handiwork. Could there be more?"

"The history of my religion is recorded by man's progress along the path of Truth!"

Zacharias' bristling attitude subsided slightly. With obvious reluctance he considered the substance of Joseph's words.

Then, with apparent unwillingness, but driven by his deep-rooted honesty, he wrote:

"In what way do you feel that we tread not this path?"

Joseph's face was alight with hope. He started to speak, hesitated, then gently removing the pen from Zacharias' hand, he leaned over the table and wrote upon the last sheet of papyrus:

"In using the rite of animal sacrifice to enrich the temple treasury!"

Zacharias' defiance completely wilted. His proud, magnificent head lowered in contrition as he held forth his hand for the pen.

With an unsteady hand he wrote under Joseph's words:

"All my life I have fought just such a conviction. I probably feared you were right—and that must have been why I always opposed you so vehemently!"

The pen fell from his fingers. He slumped listlessly in the chair, his patriarchal beard resting resignedly upon his deflated chest.

Joseph's eyes softened with understanding as he read the confession of this proud priest. He clasped the shoulders of his friend with sympathetic affection. Then quietly he left the room lest even a friendly presence make more bitter for Zacharias the utter capitulation of a life-long integrity.

Joseph entered the chamber where Mary and Elizabeth were busily spinning wool. He strode twice around the room before he noticed their questioning stare. He stopped and in a pensive tone spoke.

"I have just seen honesty conquer pride!"

Joseph's gravity caused the women to grow tense with anxiety.

A deep sigh shook his mighty frame as he explained, "Zacharias has just confessed that he sees no spiritual value in the rite of animal sacrifice!"

He moved toward the door, paused, and from a melted heart he murmured, "Victory over one's friend is victory without savor!"

When he had gone the women looked long into each other's eyes.

"Poor Zacharias," Mary said, "how his heart must have ached as his hand slew the lambs and doves!"

In Elizabeth's eyes was a fresh determination. Purposefully she said: "The season of miracles is surely upon us. No time must we lose in preparing for the part we are to play. Come with me."

She led Mary out of the house to a far corner of the court where they passed through a gate to another court of what once had been a magnificent dwelling. Now it was but crumbling brick and stone arranged in orderly but meaningless piles. Making her way through the masses of masonry, Elizabeth stopped at an ancient well from which occupants of this fallen house had obtained their water.

She looked about to make sure there were no spectators, then lifted the wooden well cover. A dark, yawning cavity gaped before them.

Mary stared apprehensively into the forbidding darkness of the opening, then inquired with concern:

"What pray, are we to do here?"

In guarded tones Elizabeth explained.

"Beneath the sand at the bottom of this well is concealed a watertight door leading to a large chamber. In this crypt are stored objects that have been preserved by our people from generation to generation. These treasures are now needed by you and me."

Along one side of the well, in a precarious state of preservation, was a wooden ladder. Without hesitation Elizabeth descended, the ladder swaying and creaking under her weight.

Mary's anxiety had become almost unbearable when at last the ladder again swayed and creaked. Mary dropped to her knees and attempted to steady it.

Finally Elizabeth reappeared. Under one arm was a small, heavy, metal box. While still on the ancient ladder Elizabeth held forth the box to Mary. Just as she clasped it the rung upon which Elizabeth stood gave way. Elizabeth held on to the box for support and frantically Mary struggled to keep them both from tumbling into the well. Elizabeth's feet found the next rung and Mary pulled her up. For a moment they stared at the box still clasped in their hands while they painfully regained their breath. Then they carefully recovered the well and hurried to the house. Mary was consumed with curiosity but Elizabeth said not a word until they had regained the privacy of her chambers and the box was on a table and Mary was seated beside it.

The bronze hasps of the box were elaborately designed and fashioned by an ancient artificer; age had not affected the careful fittings and they yielded easily

to Elizabeth's efforts. A musty, spicy aroma quickly pervaded the room.

Elizabeth removed from the box several neatly folded cloths. To Mary's astonishment and delight, they proved to be swaddling clothes for infants. Holding them up for Mary to see, Elizabeth announced with shining eyes:

"The real history of our people is written in the pattern of our embroidery and hidden in underground caverns from generation to generation!"

She spread out the spotless clothes as she continued:

"Each of these has a special significance. The wise among our people are familiar with their meaning. Also they are aware of the coming birth of your son. From garments made of these they will recognize him as the one whom they seek."

She lifted and spread before Mary a cloth of white silk embroidered in stripes of blue.

"This indicates your child is of royal birth."

Next she raised a wide band of red silk.

"This means he came from the land of Moab, through Ruth, the Moabiteess."

The third cloth was of many colors. Elizabeth held this one in her hands for some time. Her voice grew husky with reverence.

"This one, of many colors, is worn by the Prince of the House of David."

Mary was conscious of the firm, purposeful beat of her heart. At once she was proud and humble.

"Jacob made Joseph a coat of many colors," Eliza-

beth continued, holding the cloth close to her breast, her brightened eyes reflecting the magnificent happenings of the past, "indicating his father chose him to be Prince, head of his house, even though he was a younger son."

Gently she refolded this cloth and lifted the fourth and last. It was white, with a wide border of embroidered plaid at the bottom.

Elizabeth ran her fingers over the rich, heavy plaid and explained: "The gold in the plaid was sewed with a needle made of wire. This is symbol of the Prince of the Shepherd Tribes of the House of David."

At sight of the plaid, and hearing the word shepherd, a warm glow began in Mary's left side and radiated through her entire being.

* * * *

During the days that followed, they employed themselves busily sewing clothes for the two babes. The tiny garments prepared for Elizabeth's child were plain-er and took less effort than those for Mary's babe. At times this caused Mary discomfort and embarrassment.

One day when Mary insisted on sewing clothes for Elizabeth's child and neglecting certain significant embroideries needed for her own baby's garments, Elizabeth laid aside her sewing basket and spoke in a solemn voice:

"These are the first of many tasks we will do together during the coming years. It would be wise to understand certain things in the beginning. Among these things is the necessity to remove the emotion of human pride.

"We both know your child is to be the more important of the two. If you pretend this is not true and attempt to prove it in your actions, you succeed in proving but one thing."

Elizabeth gazed long into Mary's eyes, as if to once and for all raise this question and then clearly and finally settle it.

Mary knew she was expected to ask the question, and she did so.

"What does it prove?"

"It proves you feel me capable of jealousy! And by pretended importance to my child's clothes you spare me the provocation of this jealousy!"

The needle in Mary's hand trembled as the wisdom of Elizabeth's words revealed the hypocrisy of certain established amenities in man's social relationship.

"We will succeed," Elizabeth continued, "in that which is before us, to the extent we transcend the entanglement of emotions."

Relaxing from her solemnity she added gently:

"Hold no fear for my feelings. I do not suffer the pangs of foolish maternal pride!"

* * * *

One day at twilight Mary and Elizabeth strolled through the village to enjoy the coolness of the evening breezes. Majestic cypresses stirred slightly in a stately fashion. The cooling air made more pungent the fragrance of the gardens they passed.

As they approached the outskirts of the village a growing sense of peace pervaded Mary's entire being. Her world became hushed, yet expectant. In the still-

ness of the Judean eventide was born a sense of unity with all creation. She seemed to share the same life that reared the trees skyward and yet hugged the earth with the smallest of the plants. She felt as though the life and meaning of all trees, plants and flowers coursed through her; that she was colored by them, and they were affected by having flowed through her. Each giving to the other the finest of its nature.

She paused at a carefully tended bush, attracted by a single rosebud. Mary felt a close affinity between the hidden beauty swelling into being within the rose and the life swelling into being within herself. She sensed the expectancy in the way it was pointed upward toward the morrow's sun. She felt its very effort; an eager reaching, outward and upward; to unfold and release its fragrance to a higher selfless communion. Mary too became selfless, unconscious of her own identity; she was the rose and the rose was she.

While still absorbed in this rapturous unity she was distracted by a movement in the garden. She turned and saw a young man, horribly bent and twisted in body but with regular features and bright, sensitive eyes. He shuffled jerkily and it was obvious that this grotesque gait was the only manner in which he could walk.

The ecstasy of her union with the rose still filled her as Mary gazed at the cripple. Suddenly in her eyes the body of this young man was perfect and for his heart she saw the eagerly unfolding rose. . . .

A persistent tugging penetrated her consciousness. The budding rose disappeared from her vision and she

realized the tugging was Elizabeth gently shaking her shoulder.

"Yes?" Mary answered confusedly.

Pale and solemn, Elizabeth nodded toward the young man.

His sensitive face frozen in astonishment, the young man frantically felt of his perfectly formed torso, arms and legs. Finally convinced that his new body was real, he fell at Mary's feet.

"I know not who you are," he said, his voice an awed whisper, "but this was done by you!" With a glance at Elizabeth he said, "But I do know who you are!" he arose and fled.

The two women stared at his departing figure.

When he was no longer in sight, Mary turned to Elizabeth. She was almost as bewildered as the young man, and a vague uneasiness was in her heart.

"What did I do?"

"That we do not yet know," was Elizabeth's reply, a new conviction burning deeply within her eyes. She took Mary in her arms, then lovingly and gently guided her toward home.

* * * *

By noon the next day the miraculous healing of Bozrah, the young man, was known throughout Hebron. The outer court of Elizabeth's home rapidly filled with people curious for a glance at this stranger who possessed such potent powers of healing. It was known to all that Bozrah had been deformed since birth, so only one capable of miracles could have wrought this change in him.

Within the privacy of their chamber, Mary and Elizabeth sat silently together while the noise outside continued. As the tumult grew, a deep uneasiness troubled Mary. Her feelings were tinged with a vague, uninterpretable sense of guilt which she could neither define nor remove.

A servant entered discreetly, announcing that in the court were deformed people clamoring for Mary to perform more miracles.

Even after the servant had gone, the silence between the two women continued. Mary knew her wise old cousin well enough to know that this was one problem on which she would receive no advice. They both knew that in healing Bozrah, Mary had handled holy powers, and in Elizabeth's face Mary saw her intention to remain silent in the matter. It was not an indifferent or critical silence, but a reticence bespeaking love and sympathy which implied that in matters such as these she was incapable of offering counsel.

In her heart Mary knew she, too, was incapable of knowing what she should do. There were those people in the court. Should she go out? And if she did, would she see in them the same budding perfection she saw in Bozrah? If she could, she had no doubt but they would be healed of their deformities.

But something stopped her. Could it be because she detected a tone of indignation in the servant's announcement that his master's house had been assailed by such rabble? Mary felt that those who waited for a miracle in the court did so in a spirit similar to the spectators who occupy tiers in the amphitheatre, im-

patiently awaiting the sensationalism presently to be enacted for their entertainment.

Earnestly she searched herself for a decision. Her thoughts turned to the Sun. It would help her. It always had. Quickly she left the room and hurried to the roof.

She looked for a long time into its brightness, hard and impersonal at this time of day. Because her need was so great and her desire so sincere, she pled more fervently than ever.

Finally she was rewarded. The same voice! She could never forget its gentle authority. She clung breathlessly to every word.

Her eyes flooded with tears of joyful humbleness. She listened intently so that she should not miss a single word.

"This is the answer to that which concerns you so deeply. No man suffers because of a neglectful God. Man builds his own body by his past and present thoughts and deeds. Creation contains no accident or injustice. That which appears as physical misfortune is but the love of God operating in a concealed manner, providing special experience needed by the deformed. When that particular experience has served its purpose, the appearance of misfortune will be no more.

"Until this time is come we must not remove the seeming handicap, lest we disturb the plans of God. God planted good in all, and it is His plan that it unfold. If we first awaken the good in man, then we may remove the means which God uses in bringing forth the good. But if we remove the means before the end

is accomplished, before the good is unfolded, then their purpose is defeated."

The voice stopped. Mary was breathless, wondering if there would be more.

She became calm with a new poise and assurance. The voice would speak no more for she knew the answer to her question—only in man's heart could his body be healed. For man's body was but the manifestation of that which lived in his heart!

She returned to the room and spoke to Elizabeth.

"What I have unwittingly done is not good. I shall return home at once. When the crowds learn of my departure they will leave you in peace."

Elizabeth's only reply was a sympathetic nod of her head.

At this moment the servant re-entered. Excitedly he related the news that was spreading about and which he thought his mistress should know. The story was that Bozrah had always coveted his brother's beautiful wife. So when he was made perfect he tried to rob his brother of his wife. But the wife still preferred her husband.

Without comment, Mary and Elizabeth listened to the story. When it was over and the servant gone Mary said aloud as though in echo to the words of the sun,

"His heart had not been healed first!"

Elizabeth placed a comforting kiss upon Mary's forehead and left to supervise preparations for the journey to Nazareth.

CHAPTER 9

WHEN THE CARAVAN of Mary and Joseph reached their home in Nazareth, members of their household raced joyfully out to welcome them. And Zaele, the independent and the defiant, led the group.

Zaele laughed and chattered with spontaneous vivacity apparently quite at ease now among the others. There was real interest expressed as she jumbled questions about the trip and her master and mistress with news of things that had been going on during their absence. Her spontaneity indicated that she was now happy in her present surroundings.

Mary was delighted with the change in Zaele and lost no time in arranging for an intimate talk. As soon as her household affairs were in order, Mary sent for her.

Zaele's smile was humble and guileless as she came into Mary's presence. Holding forth her hand, Mary led her to a bench where they sat side by side.

"I am happy," Mary said affectionately, "that wounds of the past have left no scars."

Zaele's beautiful dark eyes glowed. Calmly she replied:

"The wounds were but to my pride; their pain finally brought understanding of their purpose."

Mary was now convinced of the change in Zaele.

"Seldom do we permit understanding to enter

through any other door," she replied, then added: "Only through pain does the little lamb distinguish between the briar and the herb."

Zaele was alert with enlightenment.

Mary turned Zaele's palm up and patted it as one playfully chastises a child. Then in a gentle tone she explained:

"The more forceful our individuality and the more grievous our transgressions, the farther we travel in righteousness when once we find its true path!"

Zaele's eyes filled with tears of gratitude. She crushed Mary's hand to her lips. In a voice broken with emotion she said:

"You are truly the wisest and most gracious of all women. Great is my debt for your mercy! Deep my shame for the manner in which I once accused you!"

Mary arose and moved to the window to permit Zaele to conceal her tears.

"Zaele," she said solemnly, gazing out across Nazareth's gently rolling hills, "you owe me nothing. We are like stones in a stream. The current rubs together our rough edges until our surface is smooth. Once our surface is smooth there is no more friction.

"Is the smoothness of one stone indebted to the roughness of the other? Only because of the rough spots of each did friction exist. Rough and smooth rub not together. If there be friction there must be roughness on both stones.

"If you are in debt to me, then I, too, am in debt to you. For upon me was a roughness. It existed in the form of resentment. Resentment of the attitude of oth-

ers toward me. In you I personified all the attitudes; and at you directed all my resentment. The current of life rubbed you against me until my rough spot of resentment was made smooth."

Mary turned from the window. Zaele was now quiet, stilled with wonder at the words she had heard.

Mary smiled companionably and said, "Now in our smoothness we can move together without discord."

Zaele's stillness continued. Mary watched the facial evidence of a question forming in her mind.

Zaele turned cleared eyes upon Mary and asked, "Would it not also be true that the smoothed stones no longer have need of one another?"

Mary thrilled at the completeness of Zaele's reasoning.

"So very true!" she affirmed. "Far greater would they be needed by those who still rub their roughnesses together and know not why."

Zaele heaved a tremulous sigh of despair.

Mary's heart gladdened as she interpreted the sigh. Casually she asked, "Is it your wish to return to the Temple?"

Zaele sprang to her feet.

"Could I?" she whispered, her volatile energies suspended in mid-air.

Mary, so moved by the intensity of Zaele's desire, could answer only by nodding her head. When she could speak she said, "Halhul is wise and good. He sent you the message that 'ignorance in the child can be traced to the fault of the father.'"

Mary moved from the window and standing before Zaele gazed deep into her eyes.

"Halhul would like to have you back." Then she added in prophetic tone, "Little does he realize that his need of you is now greater than yours of him."

With shining eyes she drew herself erect. In a manner almost like a ceremonial command she instructed:

"Go prepare for a triumphal return to the home of your disgrace. Through humility you have earned honor. You shall re-enter the gates of the Temple attended by a caravan. A caravan whose trappings will be those of the Royal House of David."

* * * *

When Joseph returned from delivering Zaele to the Temple he brought back with him a letter from Elizabeth. At sight of it Mary exclaimed hopefully, "It has happened! Her son is born!" She reached eagerly for the scroll.

Joseph turned to go. Mary touched his arm, staying him.

"These things are not without the part you play. Never was a heart more generous or a hand more willing. Included are you in Elizabeth's thoughts and I would have you share with me the contents of her message."

Joseph's devotion to Mary flooded his face as he seated himself to listen.

She broke the seal, unrolled the scroll, and in a low voice read:

"Beloved, because of your anxiety for my welfare I send you this message:

"Our son is now born and all is well!

"For the first time since his birth the house is finally at rest from the zealous stir of kindred and neighbors.

"And, as usual, the most active of all was Cousin Zabez."

Mary lowered the scroll and, curbing her interest in what was to follow, declared with appreciation:

"How like Elizabeth! Child-birth at her age must have been an arduous task. But little will we learn of it from her. Instead, she jests of Cousin Zabez's officious presence."

She shook her head in affectionate exasperation and resumed the reading:

"However, we are much in debt to Cousin Zabez. If her determined interference had not so outraged Zacharias he might not have regained his power of speech!"

Mary and Joseph smiled happily into each other's eyes at the news of Zacharias' recovery.

"It happened at the circumcision. Everyone affirmed the babe's name should be Zacharias. When I protested, saying his name should be called John, you should have heard the confusion. Our kindred searched seven generations back and found not a single John.

"In seeking to overrule me they appealed to Zacharias.

"Zacharias asked for a writing tablet and wrote that the child was to be called John.

"Even though everyone marvelled at this transgression of the custom, they accepted it. All but Zabez!

"She defiantly handed the writing board back to Zacharias and demanded an explanation. Though the board trembled in her hands her back was straight, held fast by the traditions of Judah.

"Zacharias' eyes blazed! He broke the writing tablet to bits and turning on the crowd announced in thundering, irrevocable tones that the name of the child was to be John!"

Mary lowered the scroll and she and Joseph were silent as each pictured with savour the scene described by Elizabeth.

Then again she read:

"Zacharias moved to the crib and addressed the babe. As he did, the light of Holy Breath shone about him. These are the words he said:

"'And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the King who will deliver us from the hand of our enemy; for you shall go before the arrival of the Lord to prepare the ways of His people. To prepare them to receive the knowledge of salvation from the highest, by teaching them to remove the crusts of their ignorance. To give light to them that sit in darkness, and to guide our feet into the presence of this Master of Love.'

"These wondrous things Zacharias said, but since has hardly spoken. Though his speech is returned, my once proud, grandiloquent husband is now meek and silent; his only interest is the welfare of John, who daily waxes stronger in body and spirit.

"Yesterday, something happened which gives me concern. Two Roman soldiers brought a message from the Temple summoning Zacharias to return at once.

"Why should Roman soldiers be messengers of the Temple? Why, indeed, unless the Temple has displeased the Palace. And why the summons of Zacharias unless he was the cause of the displeasure?"

"If his prophecy concerning little John has reached the ears of Roman royalty, then such action is explained. They would know more of this King of whom he spoke, who comes to deliver us from our enemy.

"With regret I burden your hearts with this anxiety. I do so because it concerns you also. We must recognize this warning and realize that our mutual path of purpose is fraught with many dangers!"

Thus the letter was finished.

They both sat in heavy silence. Finally a deep breath stirred the powerful frame of Joseph.

Mary was still, lest he should want to speak his feelings.

He murmured as though to himself, "Poor Zacharias!"

Mary waited silently.

Joseph's luminous eyes were fixed in the depths of abstraction, so deep was his concentration. His words were low and deliberate when he spoke.

"Poor Zacharias, like so many of the Sadducees and Pharisees, is caught in a snare of his own construction. The Romans only tolerate them because of their control over the people.

"Does not the law, which compels a Jew to carry for a mile the burden of a Roman soldier, sufficiently show the Roman's contempt for the Jew. If the people were not controlled by the synagogue and the Temple, they would HAVE to be controlled by the Roman armies. This would dig deeply into the purse of Augustus, in Rome.

"So, the Pharisees and Sadducees are allowed to flourish!"

Joseph sighed and his tone grew bitter.

"The Jews in power use diverse means to control the people. Paraded wisdom is one.

"The supposed wisdom of the priests and scribes is revered by the people because to them it carries the power to open the gates of Jehovah's blessings.

"The man in the street is taught that this wisdom

is attainable only through the Temple or the synagogue. The reason it is unattainable is that the mysteries of the Sadducees are oral. They can be communicated only from one priest to another. Because the secrets are so notoriously guarded, the people's imagination is excited—to the extent that fantastic powers are attributed to this withheld knowledge."

Joseph's insight enlightened Mary. Now she understood many things which had puzzled her when she lived in the Temple. The sincere, like Halhul, were subordinated by the crafty, such as Ananias.

"The Pharisees have a *different* yet a *similar* situation," Joseph continued. "They are exponents of the written law. Consequently their scrolls are available and can be read by the people."

Joseph's eyes burned deeper and a trace of irony crept into his voice.

"But loudly do they proclaim that the power of the written law is concealed within its interpretation. Consequently its power and benefits belong to none but the priests. For only they know the secret chamber wherein is applied the proper interpretation of this written law!"

A note of pity returned, softening the irony of his tone.

"Thus, the people's inadequacy is held before them. If they are not priests they cannot enter this chamber of interpretation. Therefore, they are deprived of God's good unless——"

Joseph paused.

"Unless," he winced at the painfulness of his own

words, "unless they go to the priests bearing gifts of worldly goods, in exchange for which the priests invoke for them special blessings from Jehovah.

"To prove their power they establish a market place of death, their bloody altars where innocent life is bought and sold.

"As intended, this atrocity duly impresses the people. For they feel that only those favored by special intimacy with God would dare lay such flagrant hands upon creatures of His creation."

Joseph was silent. Mary watched as his indignation subsided. When again he spoke the resentment was gone, leaving only despair.

"In claiming the right to administer the blessings of God they deprive them from everyone, including themselves.

"With unholy hands they handle holy things. Unholy hands which they in turn hold up to the people as so righteous as to be beyond their reach!"

Joseph arose and strode up and down.

"Poor Zacharias," he continued. "Long he manipulated the true wisdom of the law. We cannot handle the earth without soiling our hands. Neither can we expose ourselves to wisdom without awakening within us its counterpart!

"Zacharias has been sufficiently awakened to see the pecuniary premeditation underlying the Temple's performance. A performance he has participated in all his life. Now, he can see no way to break away, even though to continue torments his soul.

"Probably there are many among the priests and

scribes who secretly writhe in the noose of a similar snare. For them there is no escape. If they appealed to the people they would be stoned for deception. The Romans would interpret it as loss of control over the people, and promptly deal with it as such.

"So," Joseph said with regretful finality, "Zacharias and all the others who have grown truly wise feel the bite of the snare woven from fibers of their own desire for wealth and honor."

His eyes gazed directly into Mary's. Lurking deep in his eyes Mary saw anguished pity for Zacharias.

"Is there naught we can do for him?" she asked.

Joseph shook his head.

"He could hide in the hills with our kindred, the Shepherds, if all he sought was to save his life. But if I know the heart of Zacharias it is not his remaining years with which he is concerned, it is with his actions during those years already lived."

He shook his head resignedly. "No, there is naught we can do," he declared. Then a confident lilt swelled his voice. "But there is much Zacharias can do." With profound assurance he added:

"And much he will do!"

CHAPTER 10

AS THE TIME for the birth of her son drew nearer Mary felt a certain conviction grow stronger. The voice which had first announced to her that she had been chosen to have this child had also said that the throne of David would be given unto him. Her conviction was that if he were to inherit David's throne he should be born in Bethlehem, the City of David. For it was there that David was born and crowned King of the Shepherd Tribe and it was prophesied that the heir to his throne would also be born there.

As these thoughts became more clear as to their purpose she began to understand why the inn at Bethlehem had held such a strangely magnetic attraction for her. She attempted to reason away the persistency of this feeling, for Joseph had so busied himself and his household in preparation for the coming of her babe that she feared she would be unable to make him understand why she preferred to leave his home and the comforts he had prepared for her and make this painful journey to a crowded and uncomfortable inn—and there, among strangers and privations, undergo the ordeal of childbirth.

Also, even if she did make him understand her feelings, she knew it would be a sharp disappointment to him because she had detected in his attitude, as he directed the preparations, a pride and pleasure never before displayed.

This particular morning found her conflict of feelings highly intensified. The time was now so close she must either forget Bethlehem or prepare immediately to make the journey.

While she struggled for the true answer, Joseph entered.

Mary was shocked by the force of his restrained emotion. Never had she seen his face so set or his eyes so blazing. When he spoke she marvelled at the quietness of his voice.

"I have just received an announcement from Cyrenius, Governor of Syria, that Caesar Augustus has decreed that all the world be taxed!"

Mary saw the crushed mass in his hand which must be the announcement.

"What does it mean?" she questioned sympathetically.

"It means I must go to Bethlehem. It is there my taxes are to be paid!" came the answer in words of stone.

Mary's heart leaped.

"When?" she asked, holding her breath.

She could see the struggle with himself before he attempted to answer.

"Now!" he declared, the heat of his rebellion at Caesar's tyranny escaping through his restraint.

"Now," he repeated, "when your need of me could be no greater, I must journey to Bethlehem to replenish the ever-empty coffers of Rome's treasury!"

Mary's scalp tingled at this evidence of a divine hand in her affairs. The decision had been made for

her. She would go to Bethlehem with Joseph. Splendid Joseph! His concern and pride were so tensely focused upon her and her unborn child. She motioned for him to come sit at her side.

Taking his knotted fist, she gently straightened his fingers, holding them closely and warmly until all tension was gone and their touch became as tender with care as were her own.

Then in soothing tones she spoke.

"I know how deep is your concern. But deeper than our feelings and plans runs a greater purpose. A purpose so powerful that even circumstances move with its will. Since first I saw the birthplace of David it has seemed unnatural that the heir to his throne should be born anywhere save in the self-same place."

Mary could feel Joseph grow tense again. His objections came quickly.

"The motion of the camel would be beyond your endurance. Both you and the child might be injured. Time has wrought great change in the house of David's birth, it is now but a common inn."

Mary felt his clasp tighten with anxiety as he suggested hopefully:

"Could it not be that you have misinterpreted this feeling for the inn? Nothing is now there of the glory that was David's!"

Mary gently unflexed his fingers as she replied:

"Listen closely and I will tell you where still the glory lies. It lives in the heart of every shepherd who hungers for his own Shepherd by whom he can be com-

forted as surely and completely as his sheep are comforted by him.

"Because of this hunger their hope is ever turned toward Bethlehem, the City of David, from whence, according to the prophets, shall come this Holy Shepherd.

"Is it not fitting that this one they seek should be born where he is sought?"

For a long while Joseph was silent in thought. When again he spoke his voice was fresh and vibrant with a new conviction.

"May I never again question the purpose of your wishes!"

Then with voice lowered in reverence he added:

"And may I ever be allowed to serve in their fulfillment!"

* * * *

On their way to Bethlehem they had to pass through the narrow streets of Jerusalem, now crowded with the masses of milling men and beasts answering Rome's decree that all the world be taxed. Even the progress of a caravan bearing the trappings of the House of David could be measured by the span of a man's hand. His attention constantly upon Mary, and his anxious face as white as his headdress, Joseph skillfully edged their caravan through the surging mass.

After long and seemingly futile effort, Herod's Gate was reached and they emerged beyond the city's walls. Free at last from the weary tug and thrust of traffic, Joseph rested his caravan. With gentle hands he lifted

Mary from her camel and carried her to a place of comfort prepared beneath an olive tree.

Upon his knees, he deftly arranged cushions and robes and then, rising to his feet, stared in helpless anxiety upon the placid face of his beloved.

Smiling into his drawn face, she said:

"Poor Joseph, would that you might worry less. No woman ever lived who would not gladly take my place this day. With each pain comes joy beyond belief."

She reached up and took his hand, urging softly, "Lie beside me and have the rest you need."

Dazedly Joseph obeyed.

Mary sat erect, her back against the cushioned tree, her face tranquil and shining. Tirelessly she stroked Joseph's head at her side until his concern for her gave way and he fell asleep.

At that moment she was the universal mother of all mankind. Within the protective wall of her womb was infant man, vigorously reacting to nature's impulse to be born into a mother's care. While at her side, protected by the affectionate vigilance of the same motherly care, slept Joseph, man at his maturity.

Not until a procession crossed the highway and passed near the trees where his caravan rested did Joseph stir from his sleep.

When he realized he had slept while Mary sat erect, stroking his head when instead she should have rested, he arose in quick shame.

Smiling an unfathomable smile, Mary quieted his unuttered contrition and caused him to resume his place beside her.

The procession interested her. It consisted of men, women and children. Among them were shepherds and each bore in his arms three lambs. Many of the women and children carried wreaths made of evergreen, and some had young evergreen trees. They all carried something in their hands or arms, and were quick of motion, happy in spirit and light of heart.

There was a joyous cry or chant which sprang intermittently from different points in the procession.

This happy sponaneity, in such contrast to the dogged dejection within the city's walls, refreshed Mary, and the nature of the objects they carried fascinated her.

Without taking her eyes from the procession she pressed Joseph's hand for attention.

"What is the manner of this procession? The words of their song escape me."

After watching them a moment, Joseph answered:

"It is a customary ritual of the common people. They sing because a child has been born to one of them."

His gaze shifted ahead in the direction they were going.

"See that cluster of poor houses and stables?" he pointed.

Following his direction, Mary nodded.

"They are going there," he explained, "because to parents living in one of those meager shelters a child has been born in a stable."

"The words of the song you hear are: 'A child is born to us in the stable!'" This means the child is of the

people, and as one of them will be another friend and benefactor. To the people this is a very important and significant occurrence."

"Those things the people carry, what do they mean?"

"They are gifts," Joseph answered. "Everyone presents a gift, even the children. No babe born in the stable remains poor. The women give of their jewels, the men of their goods and spices, and the shepherds of their lambs."

"Why the wreaths and young evergreen trees?" questioned Mary.

"Evergreens retain their life even through the changing seasons when the finger of death is upon the leaves and flowers of other plants. These green trees and wreaths are symbols that the life of man is also retained through the changing states of birth and death.

"Though the people are as numerous as leaves upon the trees, they are helpless and alone; enemies surround them and foes dwell among them. They are intimidated by the cruel rattle of Roman armor and exploited by the greedy swish of priestly robes. But the enemy dwelling among them is the greatest—their ignorance."

To Mary everything became clear. Now she knew why David's birthplace had tugged so insistently at her heart. All the parts fitted together. When she spoke it was not only to Joseph but to all creation:

"Where should the one who is to overcome their enemies be born?" Her words were vibrant with purpose.

"In the luxury of the palace? Amid the grandeur of the Temple? Amongst the wealth of the House of David?"

She paused. In her eyes shone a heavenly light.

"Or should he be born in the manger of a stable—so the people would know he was also one of them!"

Joseph hardly breathed, so impressed was he at her words.

Mary continued, "The true heritage of the Throne of David is the love of the people. The kingdom of his psalms will live long after his buildings are crumbled and the boundaries of his lands forgotten.

"It is fitting that the heir to the throne of David be born in Bethlehem, the City of David. But it is also fitting that the redeemer of the people be born in a stable.

"Therefore we will go to the City of David and find a stable, that the Savior of the people may be found in a manger."

Joseph did not speak and Mary felt that his silence was more indulgence to her mood than acceptance of her words.

* * * *

Bethlehem was also crowded with people come to be taxed. But much more readily than in Jerusalem was a caravan of the House of David given the right of way. The instant the symbol of its trappings was recognized, a way was automatically cleared for its progress.

Not until the inn was reached did Joseph stop.

Quickly dismounting he hurried to the side of Mary's camel. He did not look up at her as he said:

"In our agreement with those who operate the inn it was stipulated that a certain room be at all times held available against the possibility of our need."

Mary stared at the milling crowd. Quite obvious was the logic of the words of Joseph as they welled up from his anxious heart. Her love of him rebelled at the necessity of ignoring his deep concern for her. In her perplexity she glanced at the door of the inn. Roman soldiers moved back and forth through its opening in a constant activity of haughty officiousness. The feeling suddenly swept over her that the responsibility of deciding where her child should be born was no longer her responsibility. She said to Joseph,

"It is certainly the right of an honorable man to provide comfort for his wife when it is her time. Pray forgive my interference and go do as you would about this thing."

Relief raised his head and brightened his face. With purposeful strides he moved to the door and wedged himself through with the stream of entering soldiers.

Mary busied her attention with the harried dejection of the people in the street. There was an abrupt disturbance at the door of the inn. The entering soldiers were momentarily conjected by the forthright exit of a large man. At first Mary did not recognize the man as Joseph. As he moved toward her she saw his effort to remove from his face the evidence of his feelings. When he spoke his voice was warped and strained.

"There is no room in the inn. Every room is occupied by Roman soldiers. Even the manager has been removed from his quarters!"

Mary's heart sang. Now she knew why she had felt that the responsibility of the decision had been taken out of her hands. She reached down and warmly clasped Joseph's shoulder and said,

"Again the curve of circumstance has pointed to us the way. Fret not and observe how clearly our actions are directed in accordance with a purpose which transcends my comfort and your personal honor and even extends to Rome and back. The soldiers who occupy our room in the inn are but additional pawns in this great purpose."

She paused and affectionately watched the struggle in Joseph as, ceasing to be a husband, he became an obedient and enthusiastic assistant.

"Again, you must forgive me," he said. "You need but name your wishes. I may not comprehend their meaning, but I will not doubt the divinity of their purpose!"

A wondrous light radiated her face as she said,

"Go put at rest your caravan. Then find the most humble of the beasts of burden. Upon it I would ride—and with you walking at my side we will go in search of that which waits for us."

CHAPTER 11

IN THE OUTER fringe of Bethlehem Joseph found a large, unoccupied cave. Customarily the cave was used as a shelter for beasts of burden. Inside was a manger, a bench, and there was fresh straw upon its earthen floor.

"Here it shall be!" Mary announced softly through lips white with pain.

Tenderly Joseph lifted her from the donkey and in his arms carried her inside. There, upon a couch made from his robes, he gently laid her. Then he stood erect, helpless and frantic.

Mary's paled lips smiled with appreciation as she looked up into his face so distorted with anxiety.

"Go, now," she instructed affectionately, "and the first woman you meet, ask of her if she will assist your wife in bringing forth a child."

Joseph hesitated. His love for Mary cried out that she should have the best of care, administered by the closest of friends. And now according to her words he must fetch a stranger, probably a careless and unskilled stranger.

Mary spoke again.

"Pray go at once. And remember it is to be the first woman you meet!"

Joseph hesitated no longer, but stumbled out of the cave, striding rapidly toward the center of Bethlehem.

He was almost blind with fear and his heart thumped painfully with the possibility that he was neglecting his husbandly responsibility in obeying Mary's wishes.

He passed an old shepherd perched upon a rock, his small frame huddled over his staff. The shepherd hailed him with a salutation.

Joseph automatically and impatiently returned the salutation without breaking his stride. Then after a few steps he stopped in his tracks, turned and stared incredulously toward the little shepherd.

The shepherd was a shepherdess, a little old woman with face wrinkled and dried by the sun and time; but in her eyes shown the clarity of timelessness.

Joseph slowly retracted his steps until he stood before her. The placid clearness of her face made his feel as awkward and inexperienced as a child.

Quickly he asked of her that which Mary had instructed him. She pursed her withered lips and emitted a shrill, significant whistle. Instantly, a huge shepherd dog was at her side. With unexpected agility she descended from the rock and signalled to the dog. The dog leaped upon the rock, seated himself and instantly assumed vigilance over her small herd.

"Now Joseph, son of David," said the little shepherdess, "I am ready to return the kindness you bestowed on me at the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem."

With astonishment Joseph recognized her as the little shepherdess whom he had protected from the men making way for the merchant's caravan the day Mary left the Temple.

With no further word the woman led off in the di-

rection of the cave. Following at her heels, Joseph marveled at her speed and at the strange turn of events. She went directly toward the cave where Mary waited, without the necessity of being so guided, and Joseph marvelled still more. He could not put from him the feeling but that she had been waiting for his arrival. However, his confidence in her so relieved his anxiety for Mary's welfare that all other things at the moment seemed unimportant.

Not until they reached the cave did she stop. Just before entering she turned and spoke.

"I am Dalmatia. For a while you will not be needed. North of where you found me, in an acacia grove, is my home. Go there to rest. Arestas, my grandson, will minister to your comfort."

Without waiting for his reply, Dalmatia prepared to enter the cave. But again she stopped and turned toward Joseph, with voice calm and assured she added.

"And as you rest, rest in peace."

Obediently Joseph turned toward the spot where first he had seen Dalmatia. His acute fear for Mary's welfare had lifted, as a black cloud suddenly blown away from the sun. He could think clearly again.

Looking down at his sandalled feet shuffling through the dust, he stopped.

"Are you the feet of a child, dismissed by the wave of an old woman's hand?" he demanded accusingly.

"Or are you the bearers of one who has reached the age of maturity?"

"And as such," he added with a ring to his voice,

"need not the counsel of women to determine your activity!"

Throwing back his splendid head he stepped forward. This time his tread was measured and purposeful.

"Rest, indeed!" he exclaimed with ironical scorn to the wind whipping his cheeks. "There is man's work to be done in Bethlehem! So there we shall go!"

* * * *

In Bethlehem, Joseph entered the crowded tax house. There a detestable *telonai* called for the properties and their respective taxes. If their owner was not present to answer and pay, the tax was heavily increased by a penalty. Joseph recognized the *telonai* collecting the tax as the same one who had once in a trade attempted to rob him of his most valuable camel. Joseph wondered how many of his properties had already been called and penalized to deliberately swell the *telonai's* personal profits.

His name was spoken by one in the crowd. Turning, he saw two of his distant cousins. They too, though far removed, were descendants of the House of David and as such owned considerable land and property in this district.

They made their way toward Joseph. As they did, he could not help but smile at their futile efforts to maintain an aloofness they felt due their wealth in the midst of the surging, unimpressed crowd which threatened every moment to trample them underfoot.

With heavy indignation they informed him that the tax collector, knowing that Joseph was absent, had al-

ready called and penalized much of his property. They were momentarily abashed when their important information brought from Joseph nothing more than an unimpressed shrug of his shoulders. But they quickly recovered their poise. It was not theirs to understand this illustrious cousin but to please him. With proper display of interest one inquired for Mary's health.

Bluntly Joseph replied, "At this very hour she brings forth a child!"

"It is unfortunate you must be so far from her!"

"She is here in Bethlehem," was Joseph's casual answer, as he strained to hear the descriptions read by the tax collector.

The two cousins looked at each other with significant disbelief. Then one said with self-justified indignation:

"It would have been our wish that one of our homes be placed at the disposal of our kin at such a time. Pray, with whom does she abide?"

Joseph answered without removing his attention from the *telonai*.

"She is in a stable near here with an old shepherdess." Momentarily he turned his gaze from the tax collector and let it rest upon his cousins, then with finality declared:

"It is she who is to have the babe. It was her wish that it occur in a stable!"

As though this closed the subject, he returned his attention to the activities of the tax collector.

The two cousins glared at each other with as much

indignation as they dared. One gathered courage enough to suggest with a tinge of scorn:

"Is the babe's father without authority?"

Joseph's eyes lost their sharp awareness of his surroundings and in a voice free of feeling he declared solemnly:

"I am not the father of the child, neither is any other man!"

This time as the cousins looked at each other it was with obvious uncertainty. Simultaneously they motioned to each other to come outside where these incredulous statements could be properly considered.

Joseph was either unaware or heeded not their departure. At this moment his name was called incoherently by the collector. Raising his hand and voice he pushed majestically through the crowd and stood before the collection table.

With eyes ablaze he accused the oily *telonai*:

"Even after I was present you attempted to describe my properties in a manner that I would not recognize them.

"You will now describe the property, collect the tax, and record its collection in the book, of all my possessions in the province of Bethlehem. And neither I nor you shall move from where we stand until it is done!"

* * * *

When Joseph left the tax house he found awaiting him his two cousins. They had decided to overlook that which they should have condemned, for fear of having failed to correctly hear Joseph's words. Also,

even if they had heard him aright, it was very impractical to court the disfavor of their powerful cousin.

Fawning in the proper manner, they expressed their desire to pay honor to Mary and the babe by their presence.

Joseph led the way.

While they were yet quite a distance from the cave, they encountered many people coming and going.

Reaching a little summit Joseph paused and stared into the little valley he had left but a few hours earlier. Where before there had been not a person or a sound there were now scores of people.

Joyous people were singing and shouting at one another. And all the while more people hurried past them toward the cave. Each person who passed bore in his hands a gift and upon his face was a look of hopeful eagerness.

As Joseph and his cousins drew near, the shouts and songs became more distinct. The people's joy was unrestrained. Freely it moved from one to another with increasing buoyance.

Joseph stopped again and now stood transfixed. In the depths of his heart was an exquisite sensation as the words of the songs the happy people sang reached his ears:

"The Prince of the House of David is born! Born to us, in the stable!

"He is a ruddy child. Fresh from the sun, and straight from the hand of God!

"Our King, promised of the prophets, is surely come!"

Trailing dazedly, the two cousins followed as Joseph made his way to the door of the stable.

Mary reclined upon a cushioned bench; in the manger lay the babe.

Joseph looked for a sign of pain or fatigue. But try as he might he could not see the details of her features. At first he thought his eyes were blurred or had failed him. Then he detected around Mary's head and face a light. The light in itself was almost invisible, yet it prevented him seeing her features clearly and conveyed to him the certainty that hidden within this light were divine hands which gently and lovingly ministered to her.

Taking his place in the procession of people moving in and out, he approached the manger. In it he saw the babe. And he saw that the babe was also held in the arms and against the breast of this same light.

The swaddling clothes were arranged about the babe like the petals of a rose, each cloth so arranged that its embroidery of age-old patterns and designs told their story to all who could read their meaning. White silk embroidered in stripes of blue bespoke his royalty. The garment of red silk meant that he came from the land of Moab through Ruth, the Moabite. And the Cloth of Many Colors, as was the coat of Joseph, announced that here lay a Prince of the House of David.

As Joseph moved with the procession he was just as deeply impressed as those jostling him from behind and holding him back from in front.

As he neared the exit of the cave he managed an-

other glance at Mary. She was looking in his direction and motioned him to come to her.

This time as he neared her he could clearly see her features, and never had he beheld a more glorious sight. It was difficult to look into the brilliance of her eyes. It was a brilliance not of the mid-day sun but the glowing brightness of unfathomable joy.

She touched his hand and he felt as though his flesh would never be the same.

"I would like Elizabeth to know," she said simply.

"A messenger shall leave at once," Joseph answered eagerly.

She turned her gaze to the manger, as the alertly attentive Dalmatia re-arranged the babe's swaddling clothes.

"Is not our child beautiful!" Mary breathed in a low voice.

Joseph's face instantly flashed a question.

"Our child?" he echoed confusedly.

Mary slowly nodded.

"Henceforth he shall be our child!" was the significant answer. Her gaze moved from the manger to the passing procession of people.

Each showed awe or joy, according to their quality of feelings. Some wept, some laughed, some sang and chanted, while others simply stared in breathless silence at that which their eyes had long yearned to see.

"And," Mary continued, her voice but a whisper, "He belongs also to them. It was because of them he was born!"

She turned back to Joseph and smiled the smile

he knew was for him alone. She pressed his hand and spoke in a low voice. Joseph's heart sang at the return of their intimacy.

"Dalmatia has asked that we bide a while with her. Pray have the presents removed to her home. From there they may be redistributed to the poor."

She smiled the sweetest of companionable smiles and closed her eyes to rest.

* * * *

On leaving the cave to perform Mary's wishes, Joseph was delighted to see his friend, Arioch, and two other shepherds standing in the procession which now extended as far as he could see.

Arioch was the devout and upright leader of the Shepherd Tribe. Years had passed since Joseph had last seen his esteemed friend and he affectionately clasped his arms.

Arioch's greeting was abstracted and impersonal, as a man still in a dream he is loathe to relinquish.

Joseph was hurt. Dropping his hands, he stared with uncertainty and turned to go. Arioch stopped him, placing a hand on his shoulders.

As Arioch's struggle with his abstraction became obvious Joseph knew something unusual had happened to his old friend and was ashamed of his first reaction toward him.

When Arioch did speak his words seemed strange to the people gathered around, but not to Joseph.

Arioch told how, in the fields to the south, while he and the other two shepherds were keeping watch over their flocks, a great glory had shone around them so

dazzling that their eyes had been blinded and they had become sore afraid.

While yet they could not see, they had heard a voice which said unto them:

"Fear not; for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

"For unto you is born this day in the City of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord."

As Ariocho repeated in calm ringing tones the words he had heard from heaven, the crowd increased around him. People approached on quieted feet, with intent eyes and straining ears to catch the strange words of this respected shepherd.

"You shall find the babe lying in a manger, and upon its swaddling clothes shall be a sign unto you."

Joseph could sense Ariocho's abstraction returning as he continued to recount that which the angel had said:

"Goodwill toward each other sleeps within all men! He who is born to you this day shall begin its awakening. Thus stirring toward fruition the day when there will be peace on earth to all men of goodwill!"

Ariocho's countenance became clear. With pleased recognition he looked into the sea of rapt faces. In a low-pitched voice that imparted a sacred impressiveness to each thought, he said,

"As if, for ere, the earth had awaited the arrival of this moment, it lifted forth its voice in praise of God, its song ringing from hill and vale.

"And it seemed that the hosts of heaven came down, blending their voices with this song of the

earth. As though the forces of heaven and earth harmonized in the mutual purpose of achieving that of which they sang: 'From Man's goodwill toward Man shall come peace on earth.' "

Arioch lowered his noble head in grateful humility. Then turning his face toward the cave, patiently he took his place in the procession that he might now see him of whom he had heard the angels sing.

As Joseph made his way through the crowd toward the home of Dalmatia, the beat of his heart shook his frame and his eyes were blinded with tears from the wonder of that which had been revealed to Arioch.

* * * *

When Joseph brought Mary and Jesus to Dalmatia's home he had thought that the constant stream of worshipers would subside. But instead it increased. It was as though all Judea had been waiting to make this pilgrimage.

Two contrasting processions from opposite directions moved slowly up the gently sloping valley of the acacia grove. Both met at Dalmatia's neat little home in the shade of the trees heavy with their yellow blossoms. One column was composed of those who bore gifts for the holy child and the other column was made up of diseased and deformed beggars.

Customarily the presents given by the people to an infant born in a stable were retained by the babe's parents so that one born to the people would not remain poor. Though born in a stable, Jesus was the wealthiest prince of all Palestine, heir to the House of David, and even holder of title to the land upon which stood en-

tire cities. Therefore, he needed not presents from those who could give. But those who could, needed to give. And those who could not, needed to receive.

Those who brought gifts entered one door, placed their presents around the babe's crib and received in turn the blessing of Mary's smile. When there was room for no more presents, this door was closed and another opened, through which came the ragged, the diseased and deformed. With reverent orderliness they selected for themselves one of the many gifts. Then as they departed, they became unaware of the prize tightly hugged to their vacant breast, so dazed were they by the radiance of Mary's smile. Thus did both the giver and the receiver carry away with them another and greater gift.

Looking out a window, Joseph saw a caravan approaching in between the two processions. The splendid camels were richly accoutered, obviously bearing wealthy and honored travelers. As Joseph watched the caravan he was impressed with the fact that now all levels of man though coming from different directions met at the same place. The three processions, the people, the people's poor, and the people's rich were all a part of the same pilgrimage as a result of the same hope.

When Joseph recognized the swaying dignity of Zacharias at the head of the caravan he rushed out to meet them. Among the acacia trees near the house he waited. The camel behind Zacharias carried a sheltered litter and soon Joseph could make out the form

of Elizabeth holding in her arms what must be John, her half-year-old son.

Not until Zacharias had dismounted from his kneeling camel did Joseph step out from the trees to greet him. With a cry of joy Zacharias rushed forward to greet him.

Together they assisted Elizabeth and John to dismount. Elizabeth's greeting to Joseph was a radiant face and a significant squeeze of his arm as he and Zacharias lifted her from the litter.

Joseph led them into the presence of Mary and the babe and departed. From upon their knees, with beggar and thief at their side, this elderly and lustrous couple and the infant John paid honor to Mary and Jesus.

Zacharias, the first to arise, moved nearer to Mary. He struggled with words to express the fullness of his heart. Mary, seeing his difficulty, spoke for him.

"Now that you three are here, all is complete. I feel Joseph's impatience as he waits outside for his friend. And there is naught here for which you are needed."

Zacharias feasted his eyes again upon the swaddled figure of Jesus, and then departed to rejoin the waiting Joseph.

Elizabeth raised her bowed head and faced Mary. As their eyes met the room was aglow with light, a soft golden light. Yet so unbearable to some was its brilliance that they fled from the room.

Those who remained seemed not affected. But one

needed but to look into their faces to see the pureness of their hearts.

Beside the crib of Mary's babe was a waiting empty crib.

Glancing toward it, Mary smiled and her joy made her smile so brilliant that none but Elizabeth could see her face.

"Lay John beside Jesus," she said, "and come and watch with me."

CHAPTER 12

IT WAS EVENTIDE, the first watch, and caught in the unreal veil of twilight was all creation. Fires were being lit throughout the wooded slopes leading up to Dalmatia's house, around which grouped those who must wait for the morrow to see the long-awaited Messiah.

Upon the porch, amongst comfortable rugs sat Mary and Elizabeth, their infants in their arms. Joseph and Zacharias sprawled in the grass nearby, while Dalmatia, ever silent, gracious and removed, sat on her heels, shepherd fashion, at the far end of the porch.

The evening breeze wafted up to the house the sounds from the grove: bits of songs, joyous greetings, voices animated in excited conversation, the congenial clatter of metal vessels as some cooked a sparse evening meal. The gathering dusk accentuated the contrast of fires and shadowy trees, while the movement among them of figures robed in brilliant colors cast a spell as though some magnificently portentous ceremony was being enacted.

Then through the grove moved a sudden stillness. As the silence became more acute Joseph and Zacharias got to their feet, their eyes searching the flickering fires and shadows for its cause.

Finally they saw why. The people had lined up on both sides of the trail to watch three white-clad men

riding three of the largest camels ever to be seen in Palestine.

The rider on the first camel, though he rode with the rhythm of youth, was obviously thrice older than Zacharias. Behind him rode a tremendous man, his broad shoulders rolling above the heads of the others, his skin black and gleaming like priceless ebony beneath the whiteness of his diadem. The third rider was a youth.

The old one halted the caravan. In deference to his independence of action, the other two remained upon their beasts until he had dismounted.

From the stilled spectators came a sudden cry of incredulous joy. Joseph, the dignified, deliberate monarch among men, swept with sponaneity, rushed forward as a child running toward the unexpected arrival of a beloved father.

"Gaspar! Gaspar!" he cried, over and over.

The old one opened his arms and Joseph rushed into their embrace.

Releasing Joseph, the venerable Gaspar spoke, his voice calm and mild.

"It is a glorious time, my son." He turned to the other two. "Joseph," he announced, indicating the huge dark man, "this is Balthasar, who comes from the lands south of Egypt." Then he nodded to the younger man. "This is Melchior of Parthia. We three, with others from different lands, were gathered together, seeking guidance in the course of nations, peoples, tribes and tongues. Near the banks of the Euphrates we sat in silent communion. Those among us who could

read the language of the stars saw that he who would advance the coming age had been born. We three were sent to follow his star that we might do honor to him who is to be Master of the coming age!"

Joseph led the way to where Mary sat with Jesus upon the porch. The three sages of other lands placed their gifts beside Mary and Jesus, then knelt upon the earth in silent reverence.

The gifts were nobility, symbolized by gold; dominion and power, symbolized by myrrh; and divine wisdom, whose symbol is frankincense.

The infant Jesus stared with bright attentiveness at the impressive white figures. The ruddiness of his skin, the gold of his hair, and the glow of his eyes were as a lamp in the growing darkness.

* * * *

Jesus and John were asleep in their cribs. Mary and Elizabeth stood at the window watching and listening to the council of the men outside.

Around a blazing fire sat the five. The flickering flames highlighted their strong, selfless faces, stilled by the seriousness of their responsibility.

Elizabeth's hand found Mary's as Gaspar's portentous words reached their ears. He was relating to Joseph and Zacharias that which had happened in Jerusalem.

On arriving there the three wise men had inquired of many people where the new-born babe who was to become king of the age could be found. No one seemed to know. Herod, when he heard of their questioning, had summoned them to his court.

There again they had asked where the new-born king could be found, explaining that while yet beyond the Euphrates they had seen his star arise and had come to pay him homage.

Attempting to hide his fear, Herod had called in council all the masters of the Jewish law, demanding of them what the prophets had said concerning such a king.

The Jewish masters had answered that the prophet Micah wrote: "Oh Bethlehem Judea, a little place among the Judean hills, yet out of you will one come forth to rule my people, Israel."

Also other prophets had foretold that out of Bethlehem would come the Messiah, the king who would rule over the tribes of Israel."

After the Jewish masters had been dismissed, Herod instructed the wise men to continue to Bethlehem in search of such a king. And if they found the child, to return and tell him, so that he, too, could go and honor him.

Gaspar became silent. The fire burned low. No one spoke. Gaspar stirred himself; rising, he kicked the fire alive, feeding it more roots. A cloud of sparks floated up to the starlit sky. Nearby, a disturbed thrush murmured anxiously. All eyes were fixed on Gaspar as he watched the sparks disappearing heavenward. He sighed as though weary with the load of man's malicious selfishness.

"Herod," he declared without shifting his stare from the Heavens, "would destroy the babe! We shall

return not by way of Jerusalem but across the Syrian desert."

He lowered his head and leveled his attention on the circle of gleaming, intent faces. His eyes blazed so that the fire seemed to pale.

The clasp of Mary's and Elizabeth's hands tightened as with breathless fascination they drank in the significant spectacle taking place outside their window.

"Those who await our return," Gaspar stated, "come from every race and clime. All are brothers in the family of mankind, and are anxious for tidings concerning this babe, who in the coming age shall mean so much to the human family."

Gaspar addressed his next words direct to Joseph and Zachariah.

"These men stand ready to give of the wisdom that is theirs and receive of the wisdom that is to be his, their only concern being the enlightenment of all humanity. From this Jesus they will receive much. And much will they contribute to his awakening as to who he really is!" He looked sharply at Joseph. "Joseph, my beloved pupil, protection against the dangers of his generation until he reaches puberty is charged to you. At puberty we will send for him. With our wisdom we will awaken his divinity. Then he shall teach us. As the Christ he will return here to his people!"

Moving over to Joseph, and by the light of the fire, he drew a map upon the ground and explained:

"Near the second stream of the Nile where it empties into the sea, and south of the ancient city of Zoan,

is the home of Aziel and his wife, Phoebe. They will provide for your safety, comfort and wisdom."

Standing with arms folded and head back, he stared into the ethers beneath the stars. Suddenly, as though he saw that for which he sought, he dropped his arms and announced with finality to Joseph:

"You will begin the journey tonight. Herod sleeps not, and with the dawn will send his guards to kill the new-born king we came to honor."

* * * *

By mid-morning of the following day, Mary, Jesus and Joseph, with Elizabeth, John and Zacharias, had reached Hebron, home of Elizabeth and Zacharias. Hebron was south of Bethlehem and on the road to Egypt.

Zacharias, Elizabeth and their entire household soberly but hurriedly busied themselves preparing that which would be needed by Mary, Joseph and Jesus on their journey into Egypt.

Soon everything was ready. The members of the household, having received expressions of gratitude from Mary and Joseph, withdrew into the house. The two women, whose love for one another was so deep and sweet, gazed silently into each other's faces while in their arms were held their respective infants.

Joseph and Zacharias pretended to keep busy, tying and untying pieces of harness. Simultaneously, their pretense ceased, and they lifted themselves to the fullness of their majestic heights, faced one another and openly approached the significance of this farewell. Joseph was the first to speak.

"Would it not be best for you, Elizabeth and John to come with us? Herod might spend his wrath on John!"

Zacharias glanced at Elizabeth, leaving to her the answer. With calm assurance, Elizabeth answered the silent inquiry of her husband.

"I have no fear for the life of John. Neither Herod's wrath nor plot of any man shall harm him while that for which he comes is yet undone. Willingly I would go or stay. The decision I leave with my husband!"

A whimsical smile lit the old patriarch's face. More to Joseph than to the others he answered, "We will not flee. The faith of Elizabeth will care for John. I am still a priest in the Temple, and as such, must conduct ceremonies for the people. Henceforth the nature of my work may prove strangely enlightening to the people, but to the Sanhedrin it will prove quite disturbing."

He moved to where beautiful young Mary stood with Jesus in her arms. Holding her face between his hands he placed his lips to her forehead. Then gently he removed the protective cloth and stared into the luminous face of the sleeping Jesus. Deftly, reverently, tenderly he replaced the cloth, and without a word or backward glance, hurried toward his house.

Joseph watched the figure of Zacharias until it disappeared, then turned to Elizabeth.

"Would that I possessed such strength and courage!"

Moving close to Elizabeth, he looked down at John,

who now being several months of age, was uncovered. Then Joseph lifted his gaze. Lifting his eyes to Elizabeth's face, he gave her arm an affectionate clasp of encouragement and without speaking moved to the other side of the waiting caravan, leaving the two women alone.

For a time they silently looked first at each other and then at each other's child. Finally Mary broke the silence. With a gesture toward John she asked:

"May I?"

Elizabeth smiled the smile of the gods. Mary took John, and Elizabeth held Jesus. Both women bowed their heads over the warm, living flesh held so closely to their breasts. Tears of humble gratitude filled their eyes. At this moment, the four of them were one.

When they re-exchanged their babes, little John was more alert to his surroundings than ever before. His large, dark eyes became fastened anxiously upon the bundle which was Jesus.

With one more glance at Elizabeth, Mary turned and walked toward the waiting caravan and Joseph. John began to squirm and whimper. With a chubby hand he pointed toward the departing Mary and Jesus.

As the caravan moved away, Mary carried in her ears the cries of John; the heartbroken cry of an infant, voicing its resentment against a loss it didn't understand, but nevertheless a loss which was keenly felt.

A strange, fearful ache gripped Mary's heart as she realized that never before had either babe been heard to cry. Holding Jesus closer, she stared anxiously into the south, wondering about this unknown land and its

strange people, a people among whom she must begin the responsibility of guiding toward maturity the holy infant at her breast.

CHAPTER 13

AFTER MANY weary days, Mary, Joseph and Jesus arrived at the ancient Egyptian city of Zoan. Upon the northeast end of the Nile Delta, beneath a deep blue sky, it rested from ageless activity, activity dating back as far as man had recorded. Under its Greek name, Tanis, kings of the sixth dynasty built a great temple. Rameses II chose the city as his residence and adorned it with many beautiful buildings.

Near the ruins of Rameses' temple, surrounded by sunt and tamarisk trees, they found a small, listless bazaar. When Joseph inquired the way to the home of Aziel, the listlessness momentarily gave way to demonstrations of respect. It was obviously a great honor to go to the home of Aziel.

Buying aromatic melons from the way-shower, they continued their journey. It led through bright green fields scalloped with bare yellow rocks. Orchards were everywhere. Trees of the orange, lemon, date, fig, apricot, olive or lotus were always in view for the Nile and its tributaries overflowed at regular intervals, maintaining the fertility of the delta.

Soon they approached higher ground. Upon a plateau was a large, aged sycamore grove. The warmth of the sun made pungent its spicy aroma. In the midst of the grove, surrounded by a well-kept clearing, they found a large rustic house. Like the trees, it was old and mellow.

When they reached the clearing, two figures came from the house. Small and slender figures in simple garb; a man and a woman, with deep, bright eyes and gentle mien; ageless, mellow and friendly as their house and trees were friendly. The man spoke.

"We are Aziel and Phoebe. You are Joseph, Mary and Jesus. The doors to our hearts and home are open to you. Phoebe, take the mother and babe to their quarters. Joseph and I will put the beasts to rest." His quiet, genial authority made even a reply unnecessary.

Not until man and beast were refreshed and resting was there more conversation. Jesus slept in his crib, Joseph and Mary were seated at the board where they had eaten. The effects of the meal were removed and Aziel and Phoebe joined them around the table.

"I have tidings for you," Aziel stated in calm tones. "A messenger from Casper preceded you by three days. Much has happened in Palestine since your departure."

Joseph and Mary exchanged anxious glances, waiting silently.

Aziel continued:

"When the three men from the East did not return to tell Herod of the child that had been born king, he was angered and fearful. Then his courtiers told him of another child, one whom the prophets said would go before and prepare the people to receive the new-born king. This angered Herod all the more. He called his guards and bade them go to Bethlehem and slay this newborn king and his so-called harbinger. And in order to insure their death he instructed his

guards to slay all male children in the town who were not yet two years of age."

Mary sharply caught her breath; Joseph's face was pale.

"All male children not yet two years of age?" Mary repeated incredulously.

With an effort she asked: "And was it done?"

Aziel solemnly nodded his head.

Mary covered her lowered face with her hands. "How horrible!" she murmured. "The many mothers whose hearts and breasts are now desolate!"

She asked fearfully, "John and Elizabeth?"

"They are safe," Aziel stated.

"Zacharias had returned to the Temple in Jerusalem," he continued. "Elizabeth went with him as far as Bethlehem and was back with Dalmatia. Zacharias knew of Herod's council, also that the guards had been dispatched, so he sent a swift messenger to warn Elizabeth. Dalmatia took Elizabeth and John and hid them in the hills. Often the guards pressed near, but Dalmatia's knowledge of the caves and hills eluded them.

"The chase in the hills became well known, so when the guards returned, they were afraid to report they had caught John for fear Herod would learn otherwise. They reported they had slain the infant king but his harbinger they could not find. Herod angrily sent them to the tower in chains."

Aziel paused and fastened his gaze significantly on Joseph.

"When Zacharias returned to the Temple," he be-

gan again, as if on a new theme, "he caused much concern among the priests. He refused to perform the rite of animal sacrifice or to receive pay for the remission of sin."

A slow smile of admiration lighted Joseph's face, a smile that was reflected deep in Aziel's eyes as he continued:

"The priests, at least most of them, gathered in secret to determine what they could do. This attitude of Zacharias' threatened to disrupt the foundation of the Temple and its source of revenue. They could, as priests, do nothing, or the people's wrath would be upon them. So they decided to have Herod do it. Cunningly they sent to Herod the story that Zacharias knew where John was hidden.

"Herod's anger flamed anew. Immediately he sent guards to the Temple, demanding of Zacharias the location of John. Zacharias replied that he knew not where the child could be found. The guards came the second time with the ultimatum that Herod would slay him if he refused to tell."

Joseph began to pale. Aziel reached across the board and pressed his arm.

"Peace, my son," he said. Then he continued, "To the guards' amazement, Zacharias but smiled, replying that perhaps his own blood would help remove the revolting stench of the altar.

"The third time the guards returned, they had orders to slay Zacharias. They found him kneeling at the sacrificial altar. The guards knew he heard their approach, but Zacharias neither turned nor moved.

With shaking hands one guard thrust him through, then they both fled in terror at that which they had done."

Joseph became rigid. Aziel's grip on his arm increased. Gazing deep into Joseph's eyes, he stated, "It was Zacharias' desire to die thusly. His death was the beginning of the end of the animal sacrifice."

Joseph bowed his head in reverence to the spiritual valor of his magnificent friend as Aziel continued:

"When the hour of salutation came, for Zacharias' daily blessing, the people gathered in the court. He did not come. After waiting long, the people began to call his name. Behind closed doors the guilty priests quaked at the results of their cruel cunning. The insistence of the people forced them to reveal what had happened to Zacharias. And there was grief, deep grief, in all the land.

"The next day, when the first courtiers came, Herod was already on his throne, as though he had been there all the night. More courtiers came, but Herod did not move. The King was dead! The death of Zacharias had been his last decree. His son now reigns in his stead."

Aziel paused, and all were stilled with their thoughts. Mary's voice interrupted the silence.

"Elizabeth and John?" she asked again.

"Fear not, my child," Aziel comforted. "Your beloved Elizabeth and John will soon be here."

"They are coming to Zoan?" Mary exclaimed incredulously.

Aziel nodded his noble, sensitive head. "Yes. Runners have already been dispatched for them!"

CHAPTER 14

AT DAWN of the day following Elizabeth's and John's arrival the entire household was astir. Aziel had announced that on this day the instruction of Mary and Elizabeth would begin.

Leaving the house they found a world still moist from the kiss of night. Leaves, laden with dew and stirring in a morning breeze, reflected golden rays of the rising sun, making huge, glittering, living candelabras of the trees. The air was a cool caress, vibrant with rich aromas fresh from the kingdom of energies. Birds fluttered and soared, their throats bursting with the joy of a new day.

They reached a clearing completely surrounded by twelve giant sycamores. All twelve trees seemed the same size and age; each, though far beyond its natural age, was in perfect condition.

The massive grandeur of the temple, with its somber, lofty columns, never filled Mary with more awe nor made her feel more close to God. As they entered the clearing she was struck by the silence. It was as though the sentinel ring of trees completely shut out all sound. Even the cry of a bird penetrated not their vigil.

Beneath the north tree Aziel stopped and motioned for the others to seat themselves upon the ground. When he spoke, his voice rang as though within a

marble hall instead of through an open space among sky and trees.

"From olden times it was ordained that you should be with us, and in this sacred grove be taught. Time is measured by cyclic ages, and the gate to every age is a milestone in man's journey toward Light. The touch of Time has opened another age. It will be an age of preparation; preparation for the Kingdom of Immanuel, which is God in man. Your sons shall bear the tidings of the age; they shall reveal to man the power he has hidden from himself. Man now believes that the source of power lies within the realm of his own strength and cunning because only in that realm can he see and touch. But power from this source is sorely limited, while the power of Holy Breath reaches beyond the concept of human mind just as its nature is beyond the sense of touch or sight.

"Sword and shield can be seen and touched; Holy Breath can not. Yet man, by using Holy Breath, may remove from earth all sight and sound of sword and shield. In man's confusion, he mistakes action for power. Action begets but action. Only in Holy Breath is power.

"In good will toward men there is enough power to destroy the armies of all nations; for goodwill toward man is one of the powers of Holy Breath. It cannot be seen or touched, yet it is just as real as the power that moves the tides and turns the days and brings to maturity these mighty sycamores."

Aziel paused and looked up and out at the trees. In his eyes burned a glow of communion as though

he sensed from the trees an approving reaction to his words.

To Mary the clearing was the circle of the zodiac and the trees were its twelve signs with their respective purposes. She wondered if the trees had been set out by masters of the earth; or if nature, unaided by man, had erected her own tabernacle. She thrilled as she thought of the Masters who might have sat within their circle and the voices that might have stirred their leaves.

And now the turn of Time had placed her within this holy tabernacle to receive instructions in the work she was to do.

Aziel had said the age of preparation was come. Man had climbed another rung in his ability to understand. Her son would teach that which man was now able to understand.

Mary pushed her fingers into the cool, pungent earth and gently patted it with reverent affection. A love for the earth, with its care and patience for man, welled in her heart. How she holds him in the palm of her hand, patiently waiting as Man storms about, searching for the answer to that which causes his restlessness.

Mary was aware of a reciprocal caress from the earth. Her fingers tingled with its intimacy and in her mind words began to form, as though the earth herself were speaking. The words were:

"I provide the arena for man's restlessness as long as he seeks the answer *outside* himself. When he finds

the answer, which is *within* himself, he needs me no longer.

"You, Mary, shall be man's true mother. I am but a foster-mother. For through you comes him who shall guide man in his awakening—the answer to his restlessness. Through you shall man find peace—through you will man grow beyond need of me!"

Not until Mary felt a firm, warm hand upon her arm did she realize she was trembling. Turning, she looked into Elizabeth's calm, loving face and placed her hand over Elizabeth's in gratitude for her sweet thoughtfulness. Elizabeth patted her arm reassuringly and withdrew her hand, for Aziel was speaking again.

"Your sons have a mighty work. For men want not the light; they love the dark, and when light shines in the dark they comprehend it not. You must teach your sons and set their souls afire with holy love, and make them conscious of their mission to the sons of men. They are revealers of the light; but they must first have the light before they can reveal the light. To many countries they will go, and at the feet of many masters they will sit, for they must learn like other men."

Aziel turned his shining countenance toward Mary.

"The only Savior of the world is divine love, and Jesus, son of Mary, comes to manifest divine love in the form of man.

"Now love cannot be understood until its way has been prepared—and naught can prepare its way but purity. Neither is purity understood by man, but because of Moses it is easier for man than love."

Aziel now turned to Elizabeth.

"Elizabeth, your son is purity made flesh, that men may comprehend it, and thus the way be paved for love!"

He paused. Gazing out at the still, patient strength of the trees his eyes grew misty with tears, and his slender, erect frame trembled.

"Alas," he sighed, "this age will comprehend little of the works of purity and love, and their road will be a bitter one. But not a thought or word or deed will be lost. All shall be written upon the ethers and when the world, as individuals and as groups, is ready, the record will remain for them to read.

"Through purity and love, man develops eyes that see and ears that hear; and when he is ready the ethers of Holy Breath will reveal to him the thoughts and words and deeds of your two sons."

Aziel's face lifted skyward and long he was silent, as though reading words already written in the Book of God's remembrance.

Mary was disturbed and somewhat frightened. It seemed that so much depended upon her wisdom—a wisdom she felt not yet at all. Courageously she interrupted Aziel's contemplation of the invisible.

"So much depends upon my knowledge, and there is so little that I know."

Aziel gently answered, "There is much time, my child, but perhaps there are certain things now you would ask of me."

Mary nodded. "What is this Holy Breath of which you speak?"

A smile of approval lit Aziel's face. "It is in the air

which you breathe, in the winds that whip the trees, and in the blue of heaven's scope. The atmosphere upon and above and beneath the earth is like unto the waters of the sea. No where within the bed of the sea can be found a crevice where water is not. And wherever this water is, there is salt. Holy Breath in air is like the salt in the sea. There is not one single space in heaven or earth where it is not.

"Holy Breath is the symbol of the love of God. It is the power and the force which maintains His creatures. In it is the law of birth, growth and fruition. An inexorable law that all life that ever was will live forever. Birth and death, as we know them, are but seasons toward life's fruition; fruition in the garden of awareness of our Godhood!

"Our salvation depends not upon the caprice of a fickle God, as some would believe, but fixed forever in the air we breathe is the principle of protection and perpetuation. It is a principle which exudes from the heart of God, and will wane not until all his creatures are drawn back into this loving heart. Holy Breath is the invisible, living, constant presence of our Father-God!"

Mary lowered her head and sobbed, so overcome was she by the glory of it all. When she could trust her voice, she asked again, "What must I do to learn the road toward fruition, so I may guide the footsteps of my son?"

Aziel's answer came at once. "Study yourself! And after you have studied well yourself, if you were to ask me what next I would reply again, 'Study yourself.'

He who knows well his lower self, knows the illusions of the world; and he who knows his higher self knows God; knows well the things that cannot pass away. And only that which cannot change, cannot pass away, is real. And only in the real do we move and have our being."

Mary's face shone with gratitude and comprehension. That which she had heard found permanent resting places within her heart and mind. One major question still remained. Again she lifted her voice.

"Tell me, what is prayer? Is it to stand, or sit, or kneel and tell God of the sins of men? Is it to tell the Holy One how great he is, and how compassionate? Is God to be bought up by praise of man?"

Aziel's face showed his appreciation of the daring profundity of his pupil.

"The fount of prayer is the heart," he answered. "When you are separated from a loved one, is it not your heart which goes to him? The mother's heart yearns for her child; the heart of a wife aches for her husband.

"Man needed to grow, to learn to walk alone, to discover himself, and from what he discovered to feel the urge to strive toward Godhood. Also, man needed a stage upon which to have these experiences. This stage with its shifting scenes we call Mother Earth.

"Prayer is the *knowing* in our hearts that God waits behind each cloud and mountain, stream and vale. That God holds forth a loving, helping hand as we move upon the stage of earth. And *knowing* that from

our own deeds and thoughts we turn Him not away but instead we turn ourselves away from Him.

“No, my child. Prayer is not in word and rite, but in the focus of the heart.” With a gesture of finality Aziel said, “This is but our first day.” Then he smiled down at Mary. “And for that first day we have had enough.”

* * * *

Three years Aziel taught his pupils in the sacred grove while Jesus and John waxed strong and splendid. Between them grew a bond of affection glorious to see. John followed Jesus about, raptly attentive to every sound of his exquisitely gentle voice. And Jesus, in turn, was at all times exceedingly considerate of John's feelings and wishes.

They played not as other children play at games of chase and battle, but seemed content to explore the forms of life they found about, whether belonging to the kingdom of the animal or of the plant. For hours they would sit side by side, silently watching the sunlight upon leaves, the wind in high grass, the antics of a fish or bees at their work. And many times they gazed together at the same spot in space as though they saw interesting processions visible only to their holy eyes.

Aziel was happiest when he sat upon his porch watching them at their play. Once Mary remarked to him about his seeming pleasure. With a contented sigh he reached for her hand and said:

“Blessed are we among mortals for the privilege of

witnessing purity and love as they develop and stretch their human wings.”

One day Aziel announced that his lessons were closed, and they could go forth safely under the care of the Three and the Seven.

So Mary, Joseph and Elizabeth, with Jesus and his harbinger, set forth upon their homeward way. They went not by way of Jerusalem, for there Archelaus, son of Herod, reigned. They journeyed beside the Salt Sea into which empties the Jordan River. Near the middle of the sea's western shore was the fertile region of Engedi. Here, with Joshua, a near of kin, they tarried for a while.

Engedi was famous for its fertile slopes, natural beauty and wild goats. Also, it was here that David took refuge while fleeing from Saul. Near the house of Joshua was the cave where, while David hid within, Saul entered and was delivered into David's hands, in accordance with the promise of the Lord. Also near the house of Joshua were low cliffs from which issued the waters of a warm spring. When the young wild kids were old enough to drink, the mother goat herded them to this spring, forcing them to drink from its mineral-laden waters. From thence Engedi received its name, which means “Spring of the Kid.”

For some weeks the travelers rested, enjoying the green hills and Joshua's proud hospitality. Jesus and John daily roamed the country in a continual state of excitement at the interesting things they found, both at the dead coastline of the sea and within the thickly green crevices of the cliffs.

But most of the time they spent at the spring. The warm water with its metallic odor bubbling from the cliffs of clay constantly fascinated them.

One day Mary and Elizabeth heard the rapid pattering of little feet descending the path from the spring. They rushed out of the house and saw John approaching with reckless excitement. Both women clutched at the fear rising in their throats.

John ran hard against his mother's knees and, clasping his chubby arms about her legs, threw back his head so that his dark shining eyes could look up into her face.

"Mother! Mother!" he exclaimed. "I made a dove from the clay at the spring and when it was dry I gave it to Jesus for a surprise." He paused to swallow, gulping more air. "And, Mother, Jesus held it in his hands, kissed it and then threw it in the air. And, Mother, it flew away! Isn't he wonderful!"

With another delighted squeeze of Elizabeth's legs, John turned and, stumbling up the path, hurriedly returned to his beloved Jesus just as rapidly and excitedly as he had arrived.

Mary and Elizabeth stared momentarily into each other's eyes, and then from sheer weakness and reaction clasped each other and wept with relief and wonder at that which they had seen and heard.

* * * *

It was decided that Elizabeth and John would remain in Engedi and that Joseph, Mary and Jesus would follow the Jordan northward to the hills of Galilee and thence homeward to Nazareth.

When the time of parting came, Jesus and John were quite manly. Not a tear did they show, but before Joseph's caravan was beyond earshot, both lads could be heard weeping in their mothers' arms.

CHAPTER 15

FOR FOUR YEARS Elizabeth remained in Engedi and gave to John the lessons that Aziel had given to her. Also she taught him the Jewish law, the prophecies, and as much of the oral mysteries as his seven-year-old mind could comprehend. Together they roamed the hills, John never tiring of the out-of-doors he loved so well.

Not far away was the cave of David, in which dwelled the Hermit of Engedi. Since John first learned of his presence there he had been consumed with curiosity to see this man living alone within a cave. Elizabeth attempted to discourage his adventurous interest in the hermit and thought she had succeeded until on his seventh birthday she asked what would make him happiest, and his reply was that nothing could make him so happy as to visit the hermit. Elizabeth agreed, hoping that the real thing would prove less fascinating than the product of his vivid imagination. So upon John's seventh birthday Elizabeth prepared some food and they set forth for David's cave.

The cave was extensive with many lofty tunnels. Just when Elizabeth had decided the hermit was a myth, one of the tunnels spread out into a domed-shaped room. Clear yellow light came from somewhere among its ceilings; out of one wall water sparkled and dripped into a small natural basin.

Beneath where the light from above shone the brightest a man sat crosslegged upon a grass mat, writing upon a scroll. Long and lean, he wore but a loin cloth, his skin gleaming with vitality and brown as a nut from the sun.

For a moment he continued to write; then he turned his face to those who had entered his home. He smiled and motioned to a ledge upon which his visitors could sit. He walked over and stood above John, gazing deep into the youth's upturned, fascinated face. Elizabeth watched him closely. This was no ordinary hermit. There was something about that which was happening that made her feel it had been foreordained, a fulfillment of things that were to be.

"John," the hermit said softly, as if to himself, "he who shall drink no wine and whose face nor head shall ever feel a razor's edge."

Elizabeth was amazed. How did this man know John's name and the prophecies concerning him?

The hermit sat upon his heels so that his eyes were level with John's.

"Tell me, John," he inquired gently, "why this cave is known as David's cave?"

Confidently and instantly John replied, "David was hiding here from Saul. Saul came into the cave to cover his feet, knowing not that David already was in the cave. Thus according to the promise of the Lord, David's enemy was delivered unto him."

"Very good!" said the hermit. "And what did David do with his enemy?"

John glanced at his mother and straightway an-

swered again, "When the Lord told David that He would deliver his enemy unto him, David was also told that he could do to his enemy whatever seemed good for David to do. But instead of killing Saul he only cut the skirt off his robe."

The hermit nodded his head with approval. Turning to Elizabeth, "You have taught him well." Then back to John he spoke, "The meaning of Samuel's books, as well as all books of the Lord, have several interpretations. For you there is a special interpretation of the account of David, Saul and this cave. To you, David is every man, and Saul is man's lower self which hunts man's soul to take it. That which hunts man's soul is annointed because there is naught of man that is not created of the Lord.

"David was told that he could do with Saul, his enemy, whatsoever seemed good to him when Saul was delivered into his hands. And when David had Saul within his power he did not kill him, but he did cut the skirt off his robe. In doing this he took away from Saul his dignity and importance in the affairs of men. A dignitary in a short skirt has little authority among his subjects. His authority melts into subjection, which is the proper place for the lower self of man.

"We cannot kill our lower self, for it is annointed of the Lord; but we can deprive it of its authority and power, subjecting it to our will instead of being subjected to it. We do that by cutting off the skirt of its royal robe and exposing the lower self in its true light."

The hermit stopped, and taking John's hand in his

he gazed deep into the clear, attentive eyes of the youth.

"John," he said with the tender affection of a loving father, "you are to lead men in purity. Tell me what my words have meant to you."

John's eyes never wavered as he answered, "They were wonderful words and they meant to me that man cannot love purity if he hates impurity. Man's impurities are his children which he must learn to direct and control. To hate them in one's self or in others, or to try to kill them outright, would make tyranny out of purity."

John glanced adoringly at Elizabeth who sat delighted at the words of wisdom this hermit had drawn from her child. Then John turned back to the hermit.

"Mother says that when we wave our virtue aloft and despise those dominated by sin we are only self-righteous, not virtuous."

The hermit released John's hand and bowed his head. His eyes were closed. To Elizabeth it seemed that the yellow light from the upper recesses of the cave moved down and pulsed in circles about his head. A sense of extreme well-being permeated her, and radiated throughout the cave. John stared with fascination at the meditative hermit.

Soon the hermit stirred himself. He arose and moved to where Elizabeth sat. Kneeling at her feet he lifted her skirt to his lips. Then he spoke.

"Men shall be blessed forever because of what you have done with John. In no other way could he purify the hearts of men except through his love of them in

spite of their error. Purity is not a cliff which we climb. It is the overcoming of error and ignorance. Only through knowledge of their nature can they be overcome."

Inside of Elizabeth was a wonderful warmth. "Who are you?" she murmured.

"I am Matheno, priest of Egypt, master from the temple of Sakara."

"Why are you here?"

"Awaiting John's arrival," was his startling reply, for Elizabeth knew the hermit had been in the cave for many years.

The terrible ache, familiar to all mothers, arose in her breast; she realized her work with John was finished. Henceforth his life and training would be under the guidance of this man, one of the masters of the earth.

Weakly she arose. John glanced anxiously at her and then got to his feet. Elizabeth turned and walked slowly toward the mouth of the cave. John followed; with every step he looked back at the hermit. Matheno stood erect, the yellow light shining in his hair, and his eyes smiling toward the stumbling John.

John clutched his mother's skirt. She stopped and looked down. Her heart had slowed its beating, for she felt the pull within her son, a pull he was trying heroically to overcome.

"Mother," he pleaded, "could I not stay a while with the hermit?"

Elizabeth forced a smile, though her face was like parchment.

"Certainly, dear," she whispered, "as long as you like."

Then, turning, she hurried toward the mouth of the cave into the hard, real light of day. John stood still, watching her retreating figure.

"Mother!" he cried, the loneliness of a frightened child apparent in his tone.

Elizabeth turned. At the sight of her face his courage returned.

"You will come to see us, Mother?" he asked with concern.

"Often, my dear," she answered. "We will have many fine days together."

John smiled with relief. Elizabeth did not trust herself to remain any longer. Her eyes blinded with tears, she stumbled into the bright sunshine and along the path toward the house of Joshua.

All the way she continued telling herself that she knew John's life belonged to his work and to the world. But before Elizabeth had become the tower of strength and wisdom that she was, she had been a woman; and a woman she still was; and the woman she was wept bitterly with every step she took.

* * * *

For several weeks Elizabeth remained in Engedi. Three times she visited John in his cave. The last time she realized he had need of her no longer.

John loved his Master, the wilderness and their simple fare of nuts, wild honey and locusts (locusts being pulp from the pods of the carob tree which served as their bread). So Elizabeth, knowing John was in

the care of hands which had been prepared for him, went not again to the cave but journeyed to Nazareth that she might be near Mary.

Mary was overjoyed at her arrival, and listened in silence to her account of what had taken place with John.

Jesus had grown into the most beautiful child Elizabeth had ever seen. When first she saw him, the prophecy of Isaiah stood forth in her mind: "In that day shall the Branch of Jehovah be beautiful and glorious!" His eyes were a soft gray-blue, gentle and compassionate. His body was tall, straight and slender. Above a clear, noble brow was long, fine auburn hair which turned into a golden halo in the sun. His voice, though low and penetrating, had a certain comforting vibration Elizabeth had never heard in any other voice.

He greatly loved the Vedic hymns and the Avesta, the Psalms of David and the words of Solomon; long ago he had fixed in his memory every single word of the Jewish books of prophecy.

One day he walked into the room where Mary and Elizabeth were, and moved his stool near his mother's feet as he was wont to do when he received her teaching. His expressive eyes were hurt and puzzled.

The two women exchanged glances and waited for him to speak. Jesus spent much time with the rabbi of the synagogue of Nazareth, and he had just now come from there.

Presently he spoke. "According to the rabbi's words," he declared, his hands resting in his mother's lap, and his eyes, wide with concern, turned up to her

placid face, "God is partial in His treatment of His children, and Jews are favored above all other men.

"My Father is a just God. He could have no favorites. Samaritan, Greek and Roman are just as much His children as the Jew." A heavy sigh shook his youthful frame. "It would be well," he continued, "if we could show the Jews that God has other children just as greatly blest."

He leaned his splendid head against Mary's knee. Lovingly she stroked his fine curly hair. Suddenly he lifted his face, a new thought reflected in its tensivity.

"Perhaps I should go meet my kin in the other countries of my Father so that I could return and tell the Jews of the blessings that I find."

Mary smiled, a divine light in her eyes. "That you shall do, but the time is not yet come. So now to your books, and when you next think of the rabbi and his words remember that if he knew our Father as you do, he too would realize there could be no favorites among His children. The rabbi is guilty of naught but ignorance, and the true guilt will lie with you if you think ill of him."

Obediently Jesus arose and departed. Neither Mary nor Elizabeth could look up from their work, so overcome were they by the destiny of this holy child beginning to stir within his young breast.

CHAPTER 16

IT WAS THE TIME of the greatest feast of the Jews, and Joseph, and Mary, Elizabeth and Jesus, and many of their kin, went to Jerusalem.

Jesus was eleven years of age, and for days preceding their departure to the Holy City his wondrous eyes shone with excited anticipation.

On their second day in Jerusalem they were all in the crowded court of the altar watching the serving priest kill the lambs and birds and offer their burnt bodies in sacrifice for the sins of man.

Jesus sat next to Mary, and she saw his face grow pale from shock at the sight of such wanton cruelty. He cringed at the frightened bleat of the lambs. She saw anger and resentment burn within his eyes, and his sensitive face grew firm and set.

Mary feared for what he might do, for still fresh within her heart was memory of what happened to Zacharias when he dared challenge the customs of the Temple. But she feared more the result of any attempt on her part to stop him.

Just as Mary had feared, Jesus arose to his full height, his firm, slender shoulders erect, his splendid head thrown back, and his burning eyes fastened on the altar and the serving priest. His vibrant voice rang out as a bell:

“What is the purpose of this slaughter of the lambs

and doves? Why do you burn their flesh before the Lord?"

The priest paused, and a great hush filled the court. The priest was obviously ill at ease as he glanced appealing behind him into the curtained Holy Place where were other priests, their presence hidden from the court. His manner changed as though he had received instructions. He became at ease, and his attitude was that of humoring and tolerating an unreasonable and obstreperous child. He answered:

"This is our sacrifice for sin. God has commanded us to do these things. God said that in these sacrifices all our sins are blotted out."

Jesus replied, "Where and when did God proclaim that sins are blotted out by sacrifice of any kind? Did not David say that God requires not a sacrifice for sin; that it is sin itself to bring before His face burnt offerings of creatures for the forgiveness of sin?"

As if in echo to Jesus' words there came from the outer ring of the court another voice, vibrant with youth and conviction.

"And did not Isaiah say the same as David?"

Elizabeth, who sat on the other side of Mary, suddenly gripped her arm with trembling fingers.

"It's John!" she whispered with incredulous joy. "It's John! And already he and Jesus have together made their stand against the error of the world."

Mary thrilled from head to foot. Looking back she saw the tall, splendid youth, his beautiful brown body covered with but a loin cloth, his long, dark hair and his eyes gleaming in the sun.

The people began to murmur and stir. Upon the altar suddenly appeared one of the higher priests. Quickly and impressively he pronounced a benediction so that before disorder could occur the multitudes were dispersed.

Jesus made his way through the throng toward the youth who had championed his cause. Mary and Elizabeth followed as best they could. The excited people pointed out Jesus to each other and whispered among themselves.

John remained standing at the outer circle of the court, Matheno towering quietly at his side. They were two picturesque figures, both personifying health and grace, and their loin cloths in contrast to the colorful festal robes and head-dresses worn by the celebrating multitudes.

When Jesus was yet at some distance John recognized him and bounded to meet him. Claspings each other's arms their faces beamed with their feelings. John was the first to speak.

"I would have known that voice anywhere!" he exclaimed, his eyes glowing with pride.

Then rapidly and excitedly John related to Jesus all that had happened in the past years, his out-of-door life, his cave, and his beloved Matheno, and that soon he was to study in Egypt in the temple of Sakara.

Holding John's arms Jesus listened, his eyes alight with interest and affection.

Mary and Elizabeth stood near by watching, their hands clasped hard beneath their shawls.

As John talked he espied Elizabeth. He stopped in

the middle of a sentence and stared directly toward her. With a sudden cry he released Jesus, stepped quickly to Elizabeth, and lifting her bodily into his strong arms he buried his face against her neck and squeezed until Elizabeth thought her bones would crack; so exquisite was the pain she cared not if they did.

Including Mary in his embrace he pivoted them all to where Matheno waited. Joyfully he presented them to his master. Mary noted that Matheno rarely removed his gaze from Jesus, and lurking deeply within his eyes she detected a reverence at what he saw.

Soon Mary and Elizabeth left Jesus, John and Matheno, and went in search of Joseph and their kin, for Joachim and Anna, Mary's mother and father, had prepared a feast for them in the ancestral home of David.

The feast was a merry one, with much of the music Mary loved. Joseph was exceedingly tender and thoughtful, and when the time to return to Nazareth arrived they had already begun their journey before Mary realized that Jesus was not with them.

Hurriedly she and Joseph returned to find him. He was in none of the public places, so Mary sought the council of Halhul, high priest of the Temple.

Halhul immediately calmed her fears by telling her that Jesus was in the private court with the priests. But what he said next struck a new and greater fear to her heart.

Jesus' demonstration in the sacrificial court had aroused the concern of certain members of the priesthood, especially so when they learned he was son of

the House of David, and he of whom it was prophesied would become the promised Messiah. Such a person would have great influence among the people, and if such a person should challenge the profitable rites of the Temple it could prove very disastrous to their coffers.

These priests were questioning Jesus to see to what extent his opinions were in antithesis to their own.

Halhul paused and sighed deeply, then continued: "The lad knows more of the true mysteries concerning the law than all the priests, and this does not please them. Knowing that I am a friend of yours they have demanded that I obtain your permission to keep him a year in the Temple here with me. And during that year I am to point out to Jesus the virtues of our interpretation of the Jewish law over the interpretation that is his."

Mary was cold as stone with fear. "Will it not be dangerous?" she asked.

"Not so dangerous as taking him home. As long as he is here where they can watch his deeds they will be unconcerned. But if he is beyond their sight their concern might cause them to remove the thorn of his existence. Even though Archelaus, son of Herod, has been exiled, the Roman rulers could be easily influenced to dispose of any threat to the Temple's subjugation of the people."

Halhul sighed again, adding, "For the time being I would suggest you permit him to remain with me. I will see that he comes to no harm."

Mary touched Halhul's arm, her heart filled with pity for this venerable patriarch.

"What of you, Halhul?"

Halhul smiled faintly. "Fear not for me. Even though I have lost my influence as Chief of the Sanhedrin, the priests fear my favor among the people and would not dare cause me harm."

Mary reluctantly gave her consent, and Halhul left to inform the priests and bring Jesus to Mary.

As the youth appeared, Mary was suddenly at a loss how to tell him he was to remain in the Temple a year.

"We were worried, and have sought everywhere for you," she greeted, still groping for a way to tell him.

Jesus' face was sober. "I regret causing you concern, but you know I must be about my Father's business!"

Perhaps this attitude of Jesus would open the way. Mary quickly suggested to him, "Halhul desires that you remain a year in the Temple. Would you wish to do so? Do you feel that in that way you would be about your Father's business?"

Jesus gazed directly into her eyes; his face became more sober, and Mary felt that he could read the deepest recesses of her heart. It was she who was the child and he the parent. His eyes seemed to say, "I know your concern; I know of the purpose behind your suggestion, and I know the work expected of me by my Father."

Weakly she motioned to Halhul, who had waited at a distance. When he joined them Mary briefly told him that Jesus would remain. Then she turned to Jesus.

His eyes had lost their probing and were gentle and affectionate. With much warmth he gathered Mary into his arms, holding her close. He kissed her cheek and whispered in her ear, "Fear not, lovely mother, and permit peace to live within your heart."

Mary released herself and fled. Never before had she experienced such strange emotions. Abruptly Jesus was no longer a child; in his presence she suddenly felt awkward and inadequate.

At the outer gate she ran hard into the protecting arms of Joseph. Firmly and quietly he held her until her body ceased to tremble. Then gently he tilted her face until he could look into her eyes. His only question was a lift of his delicately shaped eyebrows.

"It's Jesus," Mary murmured in reply. "Something inside him has suddenly grown up, and he is to remain in the Temple a year."

Joseph nodded, his dark eyes bright with understanding. Without removing his protective arms from his beloved Mary he piloted her toward their waiting camels.

* * * *

A year had passed. Again Jerusalem was crowded with people from near and far, come to attend the greatest feast of the Jews.

Mary and Elizabeth again sat in the sacrificial court beneath the altar where a serving priest killed and burned the lamb and dove for forgiveness of the sins of those who had provided them and purchased the services of the priest.

Mary's questioning eyes finally located Jesus sitting

near the altar. Halhul sat beside him, and Mary's heart ached at how hard the year had dealt with this splendid old man. His face was pale and drawn but his head was still erect, and in his eyes burned the same purposefulness.

Jesus' bearing and manner was that of a fully grown man. But about both Halhul and Jesus, Mary sensed a tenseness, as though they awaited an incident of possible unpleasantness. It wasn't long before that which she sensed became an actuality.

There was a pause in the sacrificial procedure and five priests in full regalia emerged from behind the veil of the Holy Place. They stationed themselves about the altar, and one began to speak.

"Last year," he began in sonorous, pompous tones, "there was a youth in this court who was unversed in the meaning of the rite of sacrifice. I see the youth is here again. It would please me to know if he now knows the significance of sacrifice."

The priest looked down at Jesus. "Jesus of Nazareth," he said, rolling the Nazareth over his tongue with contemptuous emphasis as though the word Nazareth alone would hold Jesus in disrepute, "is it not written that the odor of burning flesh is pleasing unto the nostrils of Jehovah?"

Mary saw Halhul place his hand protectingly upon Jesus' knee. Jesus covered Halhul's hand with his own, gave it a reassuring pat, and arose to his feet.

Mary had never seen a more impressive figure, the most magnificent young man ever to stand within the walls of the Temple. Loosely erect he stood, his noble

head thrown back so that he could look up to the altar and the priests, his face poised and relaxed, even a trace of amusement in the curved corners of his sensitive mouth. When he answered, his voice was calm, resounding clearly throughout the court. His words were:

"Those who can read but the jot and tittle of the law are deprived of the spirit of its mysteries. What you say is true, but through gross living you have blinded your eyes and dulled your comprehension. From the manner of your lives you have hidden from yourselves the true interpretation of the law.

"It is also written that when man descended into this world he was formed from two sides. With respect to the right side he has the divine intelligence; with respect to the left side he has animal nature."

The voice of Jesus suddenly began to ring with the sting of accusation.

"It is his own animal nature that man was commanded to sacrifice. It is odor of his own animal flesh, being burned by the purifying fires of divine love, that is pleasing to the nostrils of Jehovah. Not this cruel, blasphemous, mercenary travesty with which you dare profane the Temple of the Lord!"

Calmly Jesus resumed his seat. Halhul's face was dead white; the priest who had spoken shook with the effort to hide his anger from the multitudes. Holding desperately to his dignity and employing the hypnotic tones of the priesthood, he attempted to disregard as insignificant that which had just happened.

"Often a youth," he announced deprecatingly, "from the zeal of his imagination arrives at the point

where he thinks he knows more of the laws of God than all the priests of Israel."

Then he performed the rite of dismissal. But the crowds did not leave immediately. The impressive words of Jesus had stirred seeds of doubt, and the longer they milled the louder and more significant were their questions of each other.

Halhul brought Jesus over to Mary and Elizabeth. After a brief but joyous greeting Halhul drew Mary aside.

"Take Jesus and return to Nazareth at once!" he instructed her in guarded, ominous tones. "I will remain in order to learn what they intend to do."

Mary's face was pale and grave. "You are certain they will do something?"

"After that which has happened," he smiled proudly, "they will be forced to or suffer the suspicions of the people. Just look at them now!"

Halhul indicated with his eyes the various sober-faced groups in low-voiced conference.

"Go at once," he urged. "The anger of the priests might make them indiscreet and provoke immediate revenge, regardless of its effect upon the people."

Chuckles emerged through his illustrious beard. "They expected quite a different performance from my pupil! Whenever they requested it I reported that he was quite pliable and accepted readily the traditions of the Temple." He shrugged his thin, aged shoulders, a roguish light in his eyes. "How was I to know he would prove defiant at the last?"

Again Halhul hurried Mary, so she called Jesus

and Elizabeth and they made their way through the crowds to the outer gate where Joseph waited.

Briefly Mary related to Joseph what had happened. Though his face showed concern his attitude suggested that he was well-pleased.

As they rode through the streets of Jerusalem toward the Damascus gate Joseph could hardly keep his fascinated gaze from Jesus, the boy who had suddenly grown into a tower of manly strength and wisdom.

Jesus rode quietly and placidly, his eyes staring calmly at the passing scenes, and sometimes they gazed absorbedly into the open spaces above.

Except for intervals of rest they did not break their journey until they reached their home on Marmion Way in Nazareth.

Early the next morning a message from Halhul arrived. The priests had decided to bring Jesus back to the Temple so the people would think that the Temple did not consider his demonstration very serious. When sufficient time had dulled the memory of the incident they would find means of permanently disposing of Jesus. Halhul suggested that Jesus immediately flee from Palestine.

While Mary, Elizabeth and Joseph were grimly discussing what could be done, a caravan arrived in the outer court of their home. When its arrival was announced they all glanced at each other with the same fear. Were they too late? Had this caravan come to return Jesus to the Temple where he would be held prisoner until a more serious fate would overtake him?

Joseph arose and went forth to learn the identity

of the caravan. Mary, Elizabeth and Jesus awaited his return. Jesus seemed unaware of any threat, and occasionally would smile reassuringly at his mother, who also refused to admit to herself the possibility of any real danger to this wonderful youth.

Mary heard the sound of Joseph running. Nothing but something portentous could cause him to run within the walls of his own home. He burst in upon them, his face beaming like an excited youth.

"It's Melchior!" he almost shouted in his joy. "It's Melchior, sent by Gaspar to bring Jesus to Parthia where his training is to begin."

Mary remembered Melchior. He was the youngest of the three wise men who came to pay homage to Jesus when he was yet a babe at the home of Dalmatia. She even remembered the sincerity of his smile as he had ridden into their presence.

Suddenly Joseph started back out of the room. "He must think me bewitched. I had hardly greeted him before running to tell you how wondrously our problem has been cared for."

Melchior entered the door before Joseph reached it. Mary's heart lifted at sight of him; he wore the same sincere smile as his eyes flashed a greeting to everyone.

"No, Joseph, it is I that was bewitched," he laughed, a free, spontaneous laugh. "Never has my presence been so enthusiastically received."

Then in reverent tones he spoke to Jesus. "The masters of other nations, tongues and climes ask that you come to receive from them their offering of knowl-

edge so that you, in turn, may give back to them a higher quality of wisdom. Yesterday I was in the sacrificial court, and if I had known not your name nor where you could be found, when I heard your words I would have recognized you as the one for whom I had come."

Mary realized Jesus' eyes were upon her. Never were they so tender. Her heart melted with joy at the love that came from him to her.

Then Jesus spoke. "The time is come when I must learn the blessings of all men. When this is done I shall return."

CHAPTER 17

PEACEFUL, UNEVENTFUL days passed in Joseph's home. Mary and Elizabeth were much in each other's presence, and the bond of their love and affection grew in richness and depth. They talked of their two sons, and the wonderful work they were to do, and the blessings which had been theirs as mothers.

Elizabeth had long ago passed the normal span of years and now grew weaker with each day. Mary was keenly aware of her waning strength and in every way that was unnoticeable to Elizabeth, she ministered to her needs.

"My time is near," Elizabeth calmly announced one day and added, "It is my wish that it happen in Hebron so that my body may rest near the tomb of Zacharias." Then wistfully she looked into the saddened eyes of Mary and said in tender tones, "It is also my wish that you be present when I go." Elizabeth lowered her eyes as though ashamed of the request and said, "I should not ask you to make such a wearisome journey for so dolorous a mission."

Mary's throat grew so tight she could not answer. Moving over to where Elizabeth sat she dropped to her knees, buried her head in the older woman's lap and sobbed.

Dry-eyed and calmly smiling, Elizabeth stroked her lovely head, thinking of another time when Mary had

sobbed in her lap, the day of her betrothal in the temple when she thought her emotion of resentment toward Zaele had rendered her unworthy for that which was expected of her. Elizabeth reviewed the years in retrospect, satisfied that Mary had proven herself worthy. She had completed all that was expected of her as the mother of the Messiah. She had guided him well. In the soil of her influence the holy seedling had waxed strong in body, mind and soul; and Jesus was now well on the road to his fruition. So much so that he had been transplanted to the most fertile and hazardous forest of all: the forest where grow the trees of wisdom.

* * * *

The first few days after they arrived in Hebron Elizabeth seemed stronger, but soon her strength waned again. She had dispatched a messenger to David's cave near Engedi in the hope that John had not yet departed for Egypt and the temple of the Nile where he was to spend many years. Mary was anxious that he would be found, for it was exceedingly painful to watch her beloved Elizabeth's fading eyes brighten hopefully each time there was a knock at the door.

And then the day came when John was at the door! Blinded with joy Mary arose to leave them alone, but Elizabeth stayed her.

John's tall, lithe, magnificent body seemed out of place in the quiet stillness of this chamber of death. His normally flashing dark eyes were dulled and saddened.

At sight of him Elizabeth brightened preceptibly, a smile stretching her pinched features. John knelt

beside her bed and laid his cheek against her hand. Elizabeth twisted the fingers of her other hand into the abundant richness of his gleaming black hair. Her grip in his vibrant hair tightened as though from it she received the strength to speak.

"I sent for you, John," Elizabeth said, "so I might be certain that all the things which should have been told you by me were told. In a way it is selfishness on my part, because I want the peace which comes from knowing my work is finished."

She paused and drew a deep, tremulous breath. John was motionless. She began again in stronger tones.

"The sages of the ages called you harbinger. The prophets shall look at you and say, 'He is Elijah come again.' Your mission is to prepare the hearts and minds of men for the coming of their Savior. Only through purity can they understand the words and purpose of the Christ.

"To teach men to be pure in heart you must yourself be pure in heart, word and deed. By being the example, the pattern, you provide men with that which they can follow. It is not enough to stand where the paths part and point the way; you must tread the way, so that those who follow do so with the assurance that their teacher leads them over a path which to him is familiar.

"Men grow to know the unseen, inner life by outer symbols which they can see and understand. It is your work to wash men's bodies free of the lower nature and

the fumes of anger, greed and lust, so that they can see and comprehend the truth.

“Water is to be the symbol of this cleansing rite. Through this outer symbol man will grow to know its inner meaning. You shall baptize men with water, preparing them for him who shall baptize with the fires of holy love.”

The words of Elizabeth fell upon the stilled room as forms alive, and to Mary they remained suspended there in breathing, golden frames.

Elizabeth's fingers stirred in John's hair as though she sought a more secure grip, then again she spoke.

“The call of death is for us all, and it is always for the best; for, where the problems are, which we need most to solve, that is where our Father would have us be. My work here is done. I go to rest, and then to other tasks. John, you must not grieve when I am gone. Grief for those who have departed through the door of death is but selfishness on the part of him who grieves.

“Death of a loved one should strengthen those left behind, should stir their awareness of the fact that they too must pass through its door, just as they entered through the door of birth. This separation of loved ones is often caused by divine purpose. When the loved one is removed, the direction of the remaining ones' stream of love is diverted. But this does not stop his stream of love; it continues to flow. And if he who is left behind turns this stream of love toward his Father-God and toward the awakening of his own

inner being, then he is benefited far more than if his loved one had been allowed to remain."

Elizabeth spoke no more. Mary watched her fingers slide slowly through John's entangled hair and fall with gentle finality at her side.

Her beloved Elizabeth had departed! Henceforth that which they had done together she must now do alone. But in Mary's heart was naught but thankfulness that Elizabeth was now at rest.

* * * *

The years slipped by; anxious years for Mary because only at great intervals did information concerning Jesus present itself. And the news which did come was always of questionable authority.

Nazareth was on one of the trade routes from West Arabia to Damascus. Merchants from Egypt, Asia and India passed through Nazareth, some of whom were friends or kin of Joseph. It had long been customary for them to rest themselves and their caravans at Joseph's home. Many of these friends were familiar with the history of the birth and childhood of Jesus, and they happily related to Mary and Joseph any story concerning him they had heard in their travels across the countries to the south, southeast and southwest.

An aged cousin revealed that in India there were stories of how Jesus, after having studied the Brahman religion, repudiated its doctrine of the castes and taught the equality of all humanity. The Brahman priests were offended, so Jesus left their temples to live among the *sudras* and farmers, teaching them the equality of

all men. This so enraged the Brahman priests that they attempted to drive him from India. But their hirelings could find him not. He was never where they sought him. Not until he had finished his work among the farmers and *sudras* did he leave, and then he completely disappeared.

Mary hugged closely every word, building around them additional detail fabricated by her anxiety for his welfare and her hopes for the progress of his work. As the years passed she heard accounts of his work in in the lands to the East and the South. With each story she remembered the day Jesus sat at her feet and with such concern stated that he should go to the lands of the other children of his Father so that he could return and tell the rabbi there were no favorites in the eyes of God.

One eventide as Joseph and Mary sat upon their roof watching the sun set behind the land of Philistia, Mary noticed an unusual tenderness in Joseph. He hardly removed his eyes from her face; eyes that were exceedingly bright in appreciation of what they saw. "No man was ever blessed as I have been blessed," he said with sober mien. "My life has been full to overflowing since first I looked upon the purity of your face. In the presence of you and while I yet live in this world of our Father's, I want to speak my gratitude."

Mary took his hand. "Beloved Joseph," she said, "such words are unnecessary for you have *lived* your gratitude."

She leaned her head upon his shoulder and added,

"I, too, am blessed to have had at my side the strength and wisdom of your love."

Joseph did not answer but the abnormal light in his eyes burned even brighter.

The next morning Joseph did not awaken from his sleep. In prayer Mary expressed her thankfulness for the words they had spoken to one another the evening before. She knew now that Joseph had chosen that manner of bidding farewell to her and to his life.

Then a day came when a merchant delivered to her two letters, one from Jesus and one from Aziel. Mary feared the wild beating of her heart would never permit her to reach the sanctuary of her private chamber. Once there, she bolted the door. With the unopened letters clutched to her breast she flung herself upon her bed and sobbed out her pent-up hopes and fears.

She knew not how long she wept, but when the sobs racked her no more she felt as though a yoke upon her heart had been removed. With a new brightness, confidence and strength she tore the seal from Jesus' letter and began to read.

It was brief; each word she savored lingeringly. Thus she read:

"Beloved Mother, from a traveler I received tidings which caused me concern for you. They were that our Joseph is no longer with you. I do not feel that you grieve or are disconsolate, but I feel that a word from me would comfort you. We both know his work in this earth-round was nobly done."

"Soon I will return to you and the people of my native land. And with me I shall bring riches for you all; riches that will far surpass both the power of gold and the solace of human companionship."

That was all, but that little was enough. In it she read the fulfillment of her years of hope. He was coming home as the promised Messiah.

She moved to her window and gazed at the bright sunlight reflecting from the polished stone walks within the court. He was returning as the Messiah, but there was yet that of which the Sun had spoken. As the Messiah, Jesus would lead men over the most direct path to God.

In her heart Mary knew that the demonstration the Sun sought from Jesus was that man needed not to die to reach his God. Deep within the recesses of her heart an old uncertainty painfully stirred; an uncertainty born long ago of her inability to understand how her son was to achieve that which the Sun proclaimed was within man's power and destiny. But on this day of days she refused to permit that which she did not understand to rob her of the joy of that which she did understand.

Tenderly she laid the letter from Jesus aside and opening the other one from Aziel she read:

"Our teaching that begun here years ago has been rewarded beyond my most hopeful dreams. For three days your son Jesus abode with me. He has now gone, leaving for you a letter which I shall send with this.

"He is truly wondrous! And all who contributed to his unfoldment are surely blest, you above all. In every land where there could be found wisdom he has lived and learned and taught.

"He stopped here as he was returning from a meeting with the seven sages of the world.

"In every age since time began have seven sages lived. At the turn of every age these sages meet to observe how far toward love and righteousness the races have progressed, and to plan that which is suited best for their progress in the coming age.

"First the sages needed to be certain of their man. First he must be subjected to the seven great tests. The seven battles must be fought, the seven victories won.

"These great tests Jesus fought and conquered. When they were over the sages spoke as one: 'Jesus, you man from Galilee, chief of all the sages of the world, in recognition of the wisdom which you bring to man we crown you with the lotus wreath.'

"Then all the sages bowed their heads and reverently murmured with one accord: 'You are the Christ, forevermore!'

"Thus the chosen of heaven became the chosen of earth; and every living creature said 'Amen'."

For days to come Mary was conscious of naught but the heavenly song of rejoicing voices.

CHAPTER 18

THROUGHOUT ALL Judea there moved the story that a wild man had suddenly appeared on the banks of the Jordan. He came from the hills of Engedi. His home was the cave of David. He was clothed with camel's hair, and about his loins he wore a girdle of skins; and he ate only wild honey, fruit, nuts and the bread of the carob tree.

To everyone who crossed the Jordan ford near Bethabara he said: "Behold, the King has come! The prophets told of him, the wise men long have looked for him. Prepare yourselves to meet the Lord!"

When Mary heard about these things she knew it must be John who had returned from Egypt to begin his ministry as the harbinger of Jesus. She was filled with joy and immediately left for Bethabara that she might see him at his work.

In thousands of years the River Jordan had changed but little. It separated Galilee, Samaria and Judea from the rest of the world. It offered nothing to man but danger and difficulty, perplexity and trouble. Its whirling eddies, treacherous fords, shifting bottoms and changing currents were to Mary symbolic of the nature of our lower selves, through which we must cross if we are to reach the peace of the promised land.

As Mary approached its swirling yellow flood she was astonished at the multitudes of people thronging

its bank. Leaving her caravan with its attendants she made her way on foot to where she could get a glimpse of John. When at last she was near enough to see him, his magnificence left her breathless. He stood upon a promontory, his large body beautifully molded and shining like highly polished mahogany. His dark hair and face which had never felt a razor's edge gleamed in the sun at his every move. Lights flashed from his deep brown eyes as he preached to the people.

Before Mary realized it tears were in her eyes and she was saying over and over, "Oh, Elizabeth, if you could only see him!"

When she had calmed herself she moved closer that she might hear his words. His voice was strong and clear:

"Come unto me and in the waters of this stream be washed, that you may be ready to meet him who comes after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose.

"Wherein I baptize you with water, symbolic of the cleansing of the soul, when he comes who is to come he will cleanse in Holy Breath and purify in the fires of love divine.

"His fan is in his hand, and he will separate the wheat from the chaff; will throw away the chaff and garner every grain of wheat. This king of men to come is your savior. He is the Christ!

"Hearken to the voice crying in the wilderness; prepare yourself for him who comes, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"

Near Mary a wide-eyed young shepherd asked of a

local farmer: "Has this strange man been long here? Does anyone know his name?"

"For many months," replied the farmer, "he has spoken in Jerusalem, Bethany, Gilgal and Jericho. No one knows his name. He calls himself the harbinger of the Lord, but there are those who say he is Elijah come again, he of whom the prophet Malachi wrote."

The eyes of the awe-struck youth widened. "Have any of the people accepted this baptism rite?" he asked.

The farmer nodded solemnly and answered, "Many. Soon he will enter the water and you shall see!"

Mary was moved by the wonder in the young shepherd's clear eyes.

John's words became more fiery. Some of the people were stirred and asked, "What must we do to prepare the way for him who comes?"

John replied, "Practice helpfulness to all mankind; spend not all you have upon yourselves. If you have two coats give one to him who has no coat, and give a part of your food to those in need."

A publican advanced and asked, "What must I do?"

"Be honest in your work," John answered. "Do not increase for selfish gain the tribute you collect. Take no more than your king demands."

Two soldiers approached, their faces ruddy but anxious. "And what must we do?"

The harbinger replied, "Do violence to no one. Use not your authority for personal greed, and be content with the wages you receive."

John tossed aside his cloth of camel's hair, and

dressed only in a loin-cloth of skins, raised high his arms.

"Those who would be free of the empty husks of desire and greed, follow me into the purifying waters of the Jordan!"

Stepping down from his promontory he strode toward the stream.

In John had man attained physical perfection. His wide, brown shoulders and head of lustrous hair showed majestically above the heads of those who followed. None who followed approached him in strength, health or comeliness; many were deformed, lame and blind.

To Mary the conviction came that only in a perfected physical body, man's earthly vehicle, could the fullness of life be experienced as it was planned for him; that the laws governing the physical body existed not as punishment for indulging in the appetites of the flesh, but existed to guide man toward a fuller realization of this wonderful gift.

The waters of the Jordan were almost hidden by the vari-colored garments and headdresses worn by the throngs which followed John into the river. It was a sight so spectacular and impressive that the colors and figures were blurred by the tears in Mary's eyes. John's clear voice came ringing up to her:

"In the same waters, across which Joshua led into the Holy Land those whom Moses had prepared, I prepare you; prepare you for the One to come, the One who can lead you into the very presence of your Father-God."

Mary watched the reactions of the baptized people. Some were silent with reverence; some were frightened; and some, stirred by their emotions, chanted and sang praises to God and the forthcoming promised Messiah. She knew she would be unable to get near enough to speak to John so she retired to her caravan, planning to return early the next morning before the people had gathered.

But when early the next morning she returned it seemed there were more people than on the previous day. Apparently everyone else had made similar plans, and others were continually arriving.

John was again upon the promontory. He paused abruptly in the midst of his speaking, one arm remaining suspended with his hand pointing out over the heads of the assembled multitudes.

Mary's eyes followed the direction of his attention. What she saw completely took her breath away. Walking slowly toward John was the most handsome man Mary ever had seen. He was tall, slender and erect, and moved with a graceful ease. In the sun his golden hair flowed back from the noblest of all brows to rest upon strong, straight shoulders. His blue eyes sparkled and flashed. The gentleness about his countenance bespoke an infinite strength. The texture of his skin was much finer than other men's, and from it came an indefinable glow; a glow that was felt rather than seen.

As he moved toward John he glanced into the faces of the people he passed. In his eyes was the same expression Mary had seen in the eyes of an anxious mother as she gazed down at the sleeping form of a

sickened babe: love and care, free from the awareness of self.

Mary knew it was Jesus, but so enthralled was she by his beauty of form, color and manner that she could do naught but stare in wonder.

At the foot of John's promontory he stopped, and turning his face up to John he spoke.

"I would be washed in water, as symbol of the cleansing of the soul."

That particular resonance in his voice which had always gladdened Mary's heart was greatly enriched. Never had she heard a more beautiful sound. In addition to that certain quality Mary had remembered from his childhood there was something else that struck a familiar chord; something she had not associated with Jesus. His was the same as the voice she had heard from the Sun! It had the same gentle authority, the same modulated resonance. She could not believe it was the same voice, yet something inside told her it was. Also, that indefinable glow from his face! She had seen a similar glow, radiating from the rim of the rising sun.

John's arm had remained extended all this while. Slowly and reverently he lowered it, his eyes afire with joy and zeal.

"You are the one for whom we wait," he said. "You do not need to wash, for you are pure in thought and word and deed. If you need to wash, then I am not worthy to perform the rite."

A faint smile of understanding and affection moved across the face of Jesus. In gentler tone he requested,

"Suffer it to be, that we may fulfill this rite of righteousness. What I ask of other man, I too would do. And it follows that what I do, other men can do also."

John did not answer, but led Jesus down into the river. There he baptized him in the name of the Triune God who sent him forth to manifest the Christ to men.

There was a hush throughout earth as these two men came out of the stream. Two magnificent men: one dark, powerful and zealous; the other ruddy and golden, and there was in his calm and poise unfathomable strength.

All the rays of the sun suddenly seemed concentrated upon Jesus' head. His face was almost hidden in vibrations of streaming light.

From the heavens Mary heard a voice. "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!"

On reaching a high place, Jesus stopped, and lifting his voice spoke to the hushed and hopeful multitudes.

"Nothing can compare with the glory that is hidden from your gaze by the clouds of impurity. The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, closer to you than the breath you breathe. With your purity I shall light the lamp of love, and the light of this lamp will lead your feet to the Kingdom of Heaven.

"For a while I must go into the wilderness. But soon I shall return and gather unto me my own!"

Jesus turned and disappeared into the crowd. Mary's heart was sick; she feared she had lost him. Suddenly that wondrous voice spoke.

"You must always seek me by your side, little Mother!"

Mary turned, and there he stood. She rushed into his arms and he held her fast.

"I was almost home," he whispered in her hair, "when you departed for the Jordan. Long had I yearned to tread again the hills of Galilee, so that I did. You return to Nazareth, and after certain of my work is done I will join you there."

Jesus gently released her and was gone, but Mary knew that never again would she be alone. How sweet had been his voice when he called her "little Mother."

Suddenly Mary's mind was again aflame! Only once before had she been called "little Mother", and that was by the voice from the Sun as it told her she was capable of being mother of the One who was to overcome death!

CHAPTER 19

BACK IN Nazareth Mary waited for the arrival of her wondrous son. Often in her life she had thought her heart filled with joy, but the joy she felt now was almost more than she could bear. There were times when she thought her heart would burst, but always like a steadying hand was a sense of overwhelming humbleness that she had been chosen to be his mother.

There were many reports of John from the camps, but none reached her of Jesus. Never before had the country been so animated and communicative. If one heard of an incident which he believed was new, he hurried to tell others; and there was no person more envied than the teller of tales fresh from the Jordan camps.

Forty days passed, and still there was no report of the reappearance of Jesus. Strong was her conviction that naught could happen to him except that which was planned, but as the days passed this conviction wavered more and more.

One day when the suspense seemed unbearable, in an effort to divert her attention Mary walked up Marmion Way toward Nazareth's little market place. Desperately she attempted to absorb herself in selecting a ripe melon, but to her they were all alike, just melons. Fearing that friends would discover the extent of her

distraction, she determined to leave the market place and go directly home.

As she turned from the melons and the solicitous vendor, there came the sound of running feet. Down through the middle of the street, his robe and head-dress sailing behind, came a local tradesman. Panting and wide-eyed, and trying to hold on to a vestige of the dignity such information as he bore warranted, he came to a halt in the center of the stalls.

"Jesus the Christ has been found!" he announced with all the pomp he could muster.

Mary was suddenly lighter than air. "At last!" echoed and re-echoed through her being.

"He came down from the wilderness of Judea," continued the proud messenger, "where he had fasted for forty days. He teaches now with the wild man, his harbinger, at the Jordan!"

The tradesman suddenly recognized Mary in his audience. Automatically he bowed and uncovered his head.

"I especially am grateful for your tidings, Amoon," Mary said. Glancing happily about at her attentive friends and kin she added, "Soon, now, he may come to Nazareth."

Unfettered joy rushed back into her heart, and closing her veil that it might not be too obvious, she hurried home.

* * *

A few days later, just at eventide, Jesus and six disciples arrived. The expression that came in his eyes

when he looked into Mary's happy face was all the greeting she could ever ask.

"Little Mother," he said, "these are men who have chosen to follow me in my work."

He introduced them. "This is Peter and his brother Andrew; Phillip and his brother Nathaniel; James and his brother John. We would all abide a while with you."

Without instruction on her part the members of Mary's household sped to prepare for the comfort of the wondrous Jesus and the men of simple garb who were his guests.

The next morning as they broke their fast Mary saw a sadness deep in Jesus' eyes that was not there the day before.

The disciples departed for a walk, leaving Jesus and Mary alone. For a while they sat in silence; then Jesus turned to Mary.

"Little Mother," he said gently, "our beloved John we will see no more. With mind of man it is hard to comprehend that his work is finished; that so many years were spent in preparation for so few months of service."

"What has happened to John?" Mary asked apprehensively.

"At Machaerus he openly shamed the tetrarch for his lustful relations with the wife of his own brother. John was arrested and imprisoned." Jesus paused, the sadness burning deeper in his eyes. With a sigh he added, "Our John shall suffer a very ignoble death at the hands of those he accused."

Mary was stricken. She could not believe it. "You are certain?" she asked. "There has been no word of his arrest."

In reply Jesus stated simply, "Last night I was with him in his cell. We talked all night. Not an incident of our childhood was forgotten."

It did not seem strange to Mary that Jesus, though he retired in Nazareth, spent the night at Machaerus in a prison cell with John. In her mind she saw them as they talked.

"And John?" she asked, a pain deep in her breast. "Does he know?"

Jesus nodded. "Yes. At first he was bewildered. But before I left he understood that it was according to the plan."

Mary grew cold. A surge of gratitude moved through her that Elizabeth was spared this experience.

At that moment Peter returned. Approaching Jesus he said, "Master, as I walked I met the ruler of the synagogue. He asked me who you were. I replied you were the Christ of whom the prophets wrote." His eyes lowered as he finished. "The ruler bade me tell you to come to the synagogue that he might hear your plea."

Jesus nodded his head in acknowledgment, a slight smile of amusement on his lips. Touching Mary's shoulder affectionately, he arose.

"I would retire to my chamber for a while," he stated, and departed.

* * * *

In the evening Mary and Jesus sat alone in the

inner court. The ruler of the synagogue who had spoken to Peter entered and was graciously received. In tones of authority he asked for proof that Jesus was the Messiah, and why he went not to the synagogue when he was bidden.

Patiently Jesus answered: "No man bids me come and go. My ministry comes not from priests. The demands of man are not for me. To God alone do I answer."

Gazing significantly into the priest's astonished face he continued: "From whom did you obtain the right to ask for proof of my ministry? If proof you sincerely seek, then follow me and you will find it in my words and works."

Confounded, the ruler took his leave.

Mary's heart was full, and she yearned to express its fullness with song. Obtaining her lyre she returned to the court and in the soft light of evening sang her beloved songs of Solomon and David.

Hearing her, the six disciples came out from the house and sat in the grass at her feet. They were all enthralled, Peter especially, for his rugged fisherman's heart had never before felt the caress of voice and song so sweet. To these simple men of soil and sea Mary's beauty and gentle sincerity, plus being their Master's mother, made her divine within their eyes. And Mary, in full measure, returned their love and admiration.

The next day throngs of the townspeople gathered in the ante-court waiting for Jesus to appear and speak. Upon the roof he appeared, and with eyes filled with

tenderness gazed down into their anxious upturned faces. Then he spoke.

"A prophet is without honor in his own homeland, among his own kin. When my works in other towns have won the faith of men, then will I speak in Nazareth. Good will to you, my friends and kin, and I bless you with a boundless love."

No more he said, and the throng, marveling much at his words, moved away.

* * * *

North and near to Nazareth was Cana where was held a wedding feast for Mary's kin. She longed to attend, and prevailed upon Jesus and his disciples to accompany her. Before the feast was over the wine did fail. Mary was disturbed for her kin and said to Jesus, "What shall we do?"

Smiling at his mother's concern he said, "All creation is formed of the same substance. That which makes one form different from another is but the power of holy thought. Have six pots of water brought, a pot for each of my disciples, and I will show you and them what holy thought can do."

This was done, and as Jesus stood apart in silent thought the water changed to wine. The servants passed the wine, and it was claimed the best of all. The people were amazed; within the disciples arose a new dignity; and in Mary's heart stirred a new joy.

* * * *

The day they returned to Nazareth Peter approached Jesus. As though apologetic for his tremendous size he remained at a distance, and because of his

uncertainty concerning that which he was about to speak, his gaze remained at Jesus' feet.

"Master," he said, "my brother and I and James and John are fishermen. Our nets are untended and rot in the sun." Peter shifted uneasily before continuing. "While you are here, could we journey to my home in Capernaum and tend the nets? We would not be many days gone."

Mary's heart swelled with affectionate understanding for this strong man, so free from guile, now torn between a desire to please his master and a natural anxiety for his beloved nets. And in the eyes of Jesus she discerned the same feeling that was hers.

"Peter," Jesus said, and strong in his voice vibrated that stirring quality which Mary loved so well, "no longer will you stretch your nets for fish. All of you are now fishers of men. We will go to your home. There you may repair the nets so they may be used by your friends. Then along the shore we will cast our nets for the lives of men."

Peter's head came up and his eyes shone like those of a delighted child. The other five, ill at ease in the background, now joined their elected speaker, relief and joy flickering from face to face.

To Mary the glances they exchanged were beautiful. Peter in his enthusiasm announced to them as though they had not heard: "Not only are we going home, but we are going home with him. All Capernaum and Bethsaida shall see and hear our Master!"

Peter's joy-filled eyes suddenly fixed themselves upon Mary, and she saw their brightness dull. He

gazed about at the lofty ceilings and marble floors of the ancestral home of the lineage of David known as the Carpenter tribe, builders of temples and synagogues. He glanced into Mary's face, then to Jesus and back to Mary, and said: "My home is miserable compared to yours." He paused as though his courage failed.

"Yes, Peter?" Mary encouraged gently.

"We would try to make you comfortable," he muttered. And then declared with an honesty of feeling that would not be denied. "You have been so generous to us."

Within the framework of those simple words glowed a picture of warmth and beauty which Mary saw reflected in every face. There could be no earthly treasure, she thought, more precious than the genuine feeling she read in every heart.

She turned to Jesus. He nodded his head, moved to her side, and placing his arm about her shoulder said: "Yes, we would have you go with us."

With a slight but significant clasp he added: "This is the beginning of my ministry in this my native land. It is fitting that you witness the result of that for which you have spent your life."



CHAPTER 20

THE SNUG NEATNESS of Peter's home, on the north side of the Galilee, gave Mary a sense of mellow comfort. They arrived in Capernaum after dark, Andrew, James and John going on to their homes nearby; and Mary and Jesus and the other two disciples remaining in Peter's home.

Shortly after a lamp had been lighted the door flew open and in rushed young Elizabeth, eyes like stars, and calling for Peter with every breath.

Gathering her up into his arms as though she were a boy, Peter joyfully swung her back and forth.

To Mary, Elizabeth's love for Peter was plainly discernible, as obvious as was Peter's unawareness that it existed. Watching their greeting, Mary was at once happy and sad; happy at such genuine demonstrations of spontaneous joy from both Elizabeth and Peter, and saddened by a fear that this woman's love, shining so brightly from Elizabeth's face, would never be fulfilled. Peter neither saw it nor would understand it if he did.

During the first days Elizabeth was much in the house, cleaning and cooking; she and Mary soon were fast friends.

"You are so beautiful!" she would exclaim at most unexpected times.

Mary always kissed her happily, saying, "We can see beauty only if we ourselves are beautiful."

On the night of their arrival, before Jesus went into his room, he said to Peter, "Until you have repaired your nets and assigned their use to others, I would prefer my presence here be unknown. Let all know when you are to assign the nets, and on that day will I speak. Until then, suffer me to remain undisturbed in my room." Turning to Mary and Elizabeth he added with a smile, "If the time seems long, fret not, for there is nothing I will need."

* * * *

It was the third day now. Through a window Mary and Elizabeth watched the gathering crowds. Peter, Andrew, James and John were finishing the last of the nets.

Azzah, a powerful man and friend of Peter, had remained all day each day since he learned that Peter was to give away the nets. And each day, Azzah along with others inquired of the weaving fishermen concerning the stories they had heard of the arrival in Jerusalem of Judah's king, the promised Messiah.

"He is truly Emmanuel!" Peter always replied. "But not until we assign the nets can you know more, and then you will know all there is to know."

Mary and Elizabeth saw Peter arise. His glance at the others ascertained that they too were finished with the nets.

"It is time!" Peter announced to the increasing crowds and hurried into the house.

Entering, he approached Mary, his face alight with excitement. "We are ready," he almost whispered. "Shall I call the Master?"

Mary nodded her head. At that moment Jesus spoke through the door.

"When you have assigned the nets bring the people to your boat where it lies upon the beach."

Glancing excitedly from Mary to Elizabeth, Peter turned and ran from the house. They watched his huge figure returning to the nets where Andrew, James and John awaited. In private he spoke to them, and then mounting a bench he raised his arms to the multitude. There was silence.

"It is agreed among us that one of you shall be responsible for the others. Unto Azzah shall all the nets be assigned. He in turn shall choose those who are to work with him. This we do if Azzah agrees that when the fish are scarce no one shall go in need."

Proudly and solemnly Azzah agreed. Then a clamor arose for the promised tidings concerning the Messiah. Peter glanced uncertainly toward the house. Then in a loud, confident voice he exclaimed, "Follow me!"

Stepping down from the bench he strode toward the sea. Following him came Andrew, James and John, and after them came the multitudes. Mary and Elizabeth, hand in hand, followed the multitudes.

Upon the deck of Peter's beached boat stood Jesus, erect and still; a gentle wind stirring his fine, luxuriant hair as it gleamed golden in the bright sun.

Mary thrilled from head to foot at the impressiveness of his tall, slender figure outlined against the clear, green waters behind him; green that changed to violet, purple and blue beneath the shadowed fingers of floating clouds.

This background of liquid colors made the brilliance of Jesus' blue-gray eyes flash and sparkle as his gaze moved across the expectant faces gathering around him in such respectful orderliness.

Standing at the rear of the crowds Mary felt as though she were witnessing a scene in an amphitheatre. It was the first time she had been down to the water's edge. She was fascinated by the pink hue of the beach caused by millions of tiny shells.

Turning her attention from the elevated, motionless figure of Jesus, his hair and robe blowing in the breeze, she moved her gaze over the verdant sweep of the Gennesaret plain gradually rising from the Sea of Galilee, then lifted her eyes to the dark precipices of the "Robbers' Gorge" disappearing back into the western mountains.

In every direction she turned, the world was a stage that had been waiting and preparing itself for this scene, from the ageless shells beneath her feet to the wind and clouds which tiptoed by with as little distracting motion as possible. She thought this impression must come from the feeling within her own heart. For all her life had been spent in preparation of the drama that was about to begin. The first scene would be the opening of Jesus' ministry among his own people. How near would this play reach her dreamed-of climax? Would this wondrous man, with eyes so soft and face so strong, fulfill that of which the Sun spoke? Would he demonstrate to man that there is no death?

An exquisite thrill of anticipation moved through her. Jesus was about to speak. He had moved out to

the prow of the boat. A wide sweep of his eyes included every person within the circumference of his radiant presence. Lifting his glorious voice and with the simplicity of one who knows and the assurance of one who has seen, he spoke.

"It has been written that one would come to deliver the people from their enemies, one who would be king, king of the Jews.

"Many have thought their enemy was the Roman yoke; and that the king to come would remove from them this tyranny. But as long as there are Jews who, for greed, would keep in bondage other Jews, the removal of the Roman yoke would only make room for another of Jewish make.

"You people of Galilee, your enemy is not the publican who collects the Roman taxes, the Roman soldier who confiscates your beasts and despoils your women folk. Your enemy is the lower self of man; of all men, Roman and Jew alike. And not until this lower self of man is overcome will man be delivered from his enemies.

"That is why this enemy is called the 'enemy within your gates.' And it is why each man must deliver himself from his own enemy. The animal nature of man being transmuted by the fires of purity upon the altar of man's love of God is the only rite of animal sacrifice pleasing to heaven.

"Not by force of arms can the yoke of nations be removed. This but exchanges one neck for another within the yoke; a form of activity belonging not to the progress of man's awakening."

Jesus paused. His words were not what the people had expected to hear. They shuffled uneasily.

Huge, powerful Azzah raised a respectful voice. "How, Master," he asked, "is man then to overcome the enemies within Palestine and the enemies within himself?"

"Every man," Jesus answered, "is divine, created in the image of his Father. And from this divinity comes a voice; a voice which points the way to man's awakening. If you will go inside your being, shut the door, be very still and listen, you will hear this holy voice. Follow its guidance and it will lead you to the discovery of your divinity. You will then live in the Kingdom of Heaven which is *ever* at hand.

"Thus it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, says the law of the Lord.' To the extent that you permit your Father to be the judge, to that extent will you prosper. Because then you subject your will to His, and in His will is naught but justice and love."

Jesus paused, and again Azzah spoke. This time there was a light of understanding in his eyes, and an enthusiastic lilt to his voice.

"How can we know, Master, when the enemy within ourselves has been overcome?"

Jesus' reply came straightaway.

"When no longer do you judge your fellow man! A heart that is free from accusation and condemnation is a heart that has overcome anger, greed and desire, and therefore it is a pure heart; a heart wherein the Christ may abide. Thus are you reborn while you are yet alive."

Again Azzah's voice came forth. "Evil exists, because we see its power among us. Tell us how best we can fight this power of evil."

Jesus replied, "All there is was created by our Father, and all there is, is good. But all things have colors, tones and forms. These, though good within themselves, when mixed in discord with their nature produce inharmonies which men call evil.

"Man has his own will and can mix God's good things in a multitude of ways. Thus man creates his own devil and then becomes afraid of him and flees. The devil follows, casting him into fires of torture.

"Since both the devil and the fires are created by man's will, they must of necessity also be uncreated by the will of man. Thus does man learn the folly of his willful pride as compared to the peaceful joy prepared for us within the WILL of our Father God."

Jesus was silent and all knew he had finished. But there was none who needed more. The door to the Kingdom of Heaven had been plainly shown. And no longer need they fear a power of evil beyond their control.

Mary's entire being tingled. She remembered the day on her roof in Nazareth when suddenly she was freed from resentment toward Zaele, thereby finding the first peace she had ever known. Her peace had come when the voice from the Sun told her to judge Zaele no longer. And now this voice, so much like the other voice, was explaining to all how they too could find this heavenly peace: by "judging not their fellow man."

“How wonderful!” she heard Elizabeth murmur at her side. “And how simple to understand!”

“Yes,” Mary answered, her voice hushed with wonder, “the Kingdom of Heaven is truly at hand. We need but have heart to feel and eyes to see its presence.”

CHAPTER 21

FOR THREE years Jesus and his disciples ministered to the people of Palestine. Mary and young Elizabeth became inseparable, and often they followed Jesus and Peter as they moved from place to place. Mary saw many miraculous things performed; the sick were made whole, the blind to see, the lame to walk, and on several occasions the dead were restored to life.

Once, after a bedridden woman was cured of her illness by merely touching the hem of Jesus' robe, Mary, who was walking far back in the procession, remembered the crippled young man in Hebron whose deformity she had caused to disappear. The voice of the Sun then had told her that many of man's physical infirmities carried with them a divine purpose.

As Mary pondered thusly, Jesus was suddenly walking beside her and he spoke directly into her thoughts.

"That is true," he said, in answer to the question she was considering. "But it is also true that only where there has been faith have I made men whole. Those who are capable of having faith in my ability to administer the powers of God have become awakened, and therefore need no longer their physical handicaps."

Jesus then disappeared from her side as quickly as he had appeared. Standing on tiptoe Mary could see his beautiful head among the leaders of the procession,

and wondered if he had ever really left his position there to dispell the question in her mind.

* * * *

One day when Mary was living in her home in Jerusalem, Peter came to see her. She could see he was deeply disturbed as they chatted of many things. Finally with a great sigh he turned his clear, simple eyes to hers and said:

"Herod on his birthday made a supper to his lords, high captains, and chief landholders of Galilee. During the supper Salome, daughter of Herodias, danced and so pleased Herod that he said, 'Ask of me whatsoever you will, and I will give it, unto the half of my kingdom.'

"Salome questioned Herodias, her mother, what she should ask. Our John, the Master's harbinger, was in Herod's prison because he had accused Herod of unlawfully taking unto himself Herodias, his brother's wife. Herodias, recognizing her opportunity to avenge herself against John, told her daughter to ask that the head of John the Baptist be brought forth upon a charger."

Peter paused; a deep sigh shook his tremendous frame, then he continued with averted eyes.

"The king was reluctant, but he had made an oath, so he immediately sent an executioner who beheaded John in the prison and brought back upon a charger his head and placed it before the damsel. Salome fearfully directed him to take it to her mother."

Peter turned his eyes upon Mary again. This time she read in them even greater pain and anxiety. She

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knew that the real cause of his distress was now about to be revealed.

"After this happened to John," Peter began with difficulty, "our Master, Jesus, told us that he himself must also suffer many things, would be rejected by the elders, the priests and the scribes."

Peter paused and wet his lips. With obvious effort he continued.

"Then the Master said that he too would be killed—and after three days would rise again!"

Peter groaned as he rested his massive head in his hands.

"I doubted him," he moaned, "for I could not believe it. I told him that with a sweep of his hand he could crumble the temple to earth."

"And what did he say?" Mary heard herself question anxiously.

"He rebuked me," Peter replied woefully, "and said, 'you savour not the things of God, but the things that be of men.'"

Both Mary and Peter were crushed beneath a weighty silence. The fact that Jesus was to meet a fate similar to John's so staggered Mary's mind that she was for a time unconscious of her own existence. Then within her memory a thought began to stir. A phrase Peter had uttered was repeating itself in the recesses of her mind. Clearer and more emphatic it grew, until her reason became vibrantly alert to its significance.

"And after three days rise again!" Jesus had said that to them. There was much Jesus said to his disciples which they comprehended not. To rise from

death after three days was but another teaching which was beyond their understanding. To be killed by the priests they did understand.

Since she was a maiden of fourteen, facing the rising sun from her private sanctuary on the balustrade of the Temple, she had been waiting and listening for just this evidence; evidence that Jesus would fulfill the mission of the Sun and demonstrate that man held dominion over the death he feared. And now, when the long-awaited evidence had come, she recognized it not because it came hand-in-hand with the distracting dragon man had made of death.

"How else could he demonstrate over death except that he die?" demanded her heart joyfully. Mary was relieved instantly.

"Peter!" she exclaimed. "Peter!"

Roused from his miserable lethargy he raised his head to Mary and stared incredulously at her smiling face.

"Listen to me, Peter!" Mary urged, tugging at his sleeve. "Did not Jesus say that on the third day he would rise again?"

Automatically Peter nodded his head.

"Don't you see what that means?" she exclaimed, looking deep into his eyes. "Jesus told you he would be killed and then arise again. He is to bring himself back from the grave. You are not to lose your Master. If the grave cannot separate you from him, then you will be together forever. Think, Peter, think! Don't you see what this means, to you and to all men? Has he not told

you, over and over, that what he does, you and all other men can do also!"

Slowly Peter rose to his feet. As the truth of Mary's words illuminated his face it was beautiful to behold. She watched in silence as his simple, direct mind assimilated the meaning of her words. Gradually his eyes, staring into space, began to glow with wonder.

"It is true!" he muttered dazedly. "It is true!"

As if in a trance he turned and moved toward the door. Mary rose and walked with him.

In a columned hallway they met Elizabeth where she had waited to see Peter when his talk with Mary would be finished. Rushing forward she happily clasped his powerful arms, turning up to him a face aglow with love.

A smile flickered at the corners of Peter's lips. Clumsily putting an arm around her shoulders he murmured, "Elizabeth! How happy I am to see you." He was yet too dazed to be completely aware of his actions.

With no further word Peter released Elizabeth and continued his trance-like tread through the doorway. Mary and Elizabeth watched him until he disappeared into the moving throngs beneath the brilliant sunlight.

* * * *

In the days that followed, Elizabeth occupied herself continually with whatever activity she could find. Gradually she assumed the responsibility of the requirements of Mary's home; and Mary, knowing her need for absorbing action, hindered her not.

One day she rushed breathlessly into Mary's chamber, still carrying her market basket. With flushed

cheeks and shining eyes she related to Mary what she had seen.

"I saw a crowd at the Temple gate," she breathed. "I went to see what it meant; and standing before the portion of the court used by the money-changers was Jesus. You should have seen him. He was wonderful! For a long time he just stood and stared at them. His face was calm but his eyes were like lightning. Then slowly and deliberately he took the cord from about his waist and attached it to his staff."

Elizabeth paused for breath.

"And then with the staff in his hand he moved in upon the money-changers and began to lash them with the cord. Methodically and with no display of passion he lashed them until all fled. So overcome were they by his manner that many left their money upon the changing tables. One, who seemed the wealthiest, was the last to go, and before he went demanded of Jesus by what authority he did act. Jesus replied these words to him: 'It is written that my Father's house shall be a house of prayer, and you have made it a den of thieves!'"

Mary thrilled with Elizabeth's story. "He broke the lease agreement for that portion of the Temple!" she exclaimed with approval.

"Lease?" Elizabeth questioned.

"Yes!" Mary explained. "The land upon which stands the Temple belongs to Jesus as Prince of the House of David. When the land was leased by our fathers it was written it should be used for a house of prayer. According to law, if the land is used for other

purposes than written in the lease, and if the owner approves not of the purposes, he can break the lease by attaching his cord to his staff and whipping the offender off the land."

"How wonderful!" Elizabeth exclaimed. "But that is not all. He then went into the inner court where the rite of sacrifice was being performed. And I followed."

Mary could hardly contain herself. "Tell me—hurry, child! Tell me!" she pleaded.

"Many people were there and many lambs and doves had been killed and burned. Jesus did not stop until he reached the base of the altar. Then raising his arm and pointing above at the priest he said in a loud voice, 'You people of Israel, know you not that your heavenly Father turns away His face from such cruel destruction of His beloved creatures?'

"You should have heard the silence," Elizabeth interpolated, "and seen the fear crawl across the face of the priest performing the rite!"

"Hasten; tell me all!" Mary begged. "What more did Jesus say?"

"Still pointing at the priest upon the altar he said, 'You need not this wanton butcher to receive your Father's blessings. To appeal through such a bloody mediator is but to withhold from yourselves your good. Think you that your Father-God has need of Caesar's gold? The true altar of God is your heart. Destroy within its fire your anger, greed, lust and fear, and you will receive direct from God the blessings prepared for you.' And then he disappeared," Elizabeth announced solemnly.

For a moment Mary was silent, reviewing Elizabeth's story. Then she asked, "Did you tarry? What effect did his words have upon the people?"

"Many left; some demanded back their money from the priest; others shouted angry accusations. If the priest had not retired there would probably have been a riot."

Tears filled Mary's eyes. "Blessed Joseph and Zacharias!" she murmured. "If only they too could have seen this day: the fulfillment of that in which Joseph believed and for which Zacharias gave his life: the abolishment of animal sacrifice!"

* * * *

The next morning Mary was weaving in the court of her house. She planned to make a waist for Elizabeth and wanted to finish the cloth before the day grew warm. A servant escorted a fully-veiled woman into her presence and departed.

"May I be seated?" the caller asked, indicating a bench nearby.

Graciously Mary nodded her head, curious about the familiarity of the woman's voice. When the visitor had seated herself she removed her veils. It was Zaele! But what a changed Zaele. Her voluptuous beauty, which in her youth was blatant and proud, now was reposed with a delicate dignity, and her once arrogant eyes were soft and gentle with an arresting quality of charm. Mary was delighted.

"Zaele!" she exclaimed, pulling her from the bench to her feet and embracing her. Zaele's arms trembled as she returned the embrace. Anxiously she asked:

"Do you remember when I reported you to the tribunal and Ananias attempted to have you disgraced?"

"Yes," Mary answered gently, drawing Zaele to the bench beside her, "but only as an incident in our childhood. Certainly not as anything to yet cause you concern."

A faint smile brightened Zaele's dark eyes as she spoke. And Mary could see in them genuine affection.

"I know that in your heart bitterness cannot live. But for years I have been chastised by the thought of what this deed of mine might have caused if Halhul had not been alive."

Zaele paused, her manner profoundly serious.

"What Ananias failed to accomplish when he tried to disgrace you, he plans now to achieve by destroying the son you bore!"

Mary clutched the cool marble bench, but did not interrupt.

"After you made it possible for me to return to the Temple," Zaele continued, "and my understanding grew, the meaning of Halhul's words that day when he accused Ananias became very clear. I have seen his prophecy fulfilled. After Halhul's death I watched in secret the changing methods of the Temple. Ananias and his priests have but one desire: to obtain the people's shekels so they may spend them in riotous living outside the Temple.

"Yesterday, after your Jesus endangered their most profitable source of wealth, the rite of animal sacrifice, they became exceedingly angry and excited. I hid and listened. They determine to dispose of him immedi-

ately. They departed to the palace of Caiaphas, one of the high priests, to discuss ways to dispose of Jesus.

"A cousin of mine is servant in Caiaphas's palace. It was from her that I learned of the priests' debauchery; for much of it took place there. I followed them to the palace, and my cousin placed me where I could hear their words."

Mary thrilled at Zaele's daring resourcefulness.

"In the meeting," Zaele continued, "besides the Sadducees there were also Pharisees, lawyers, and scribes. All these obtain wealth by distorting truth before the people's eyes. And if your Jesus should sufficiently expose them to the people they would lose their source of wealth and also be in danger for their lives.

"I heard them plot. It was their plan to trick Jesus into being guilty both of contempt for Caesar's laws and blasphemy according to the Jewish laws.

"A Pharisee was chosen who would question him publicly concerning the payment of the tribute money. A Sadducee was chosen who would attempt to confuse him on the subject of the resurrection, and a lawyer was named who would question him on the greatest of the commandments.

"Other men were chosen who were to go among the people with much money to buy those who would bear false witnesses and those who would raise a cry of blasphemy and treason at certain given signals.

"Caiaphas said his arrest must be made in secret, when the multitudes were not near, else the common people might stand forth in his defense.

"Ananias then told that the twelve with Jesus went

each day to pray in secret; and if their trysting place were found, then they could seize him without the knowledge of the people.

"Then he added that he knew one of the twelve who did worship wealth, Judas by name, who for a sum, he believed, would lead him to the secret place. And Caiaphas said if Ananias would bribe this Judas to aid in seizing Jesus, the others would pay to Ananias thirty silver pieces. Ananias agreed."

Mary trembled. "Their plans are thorough," she managed to say.

"But now that they are known cannot he be saved?" Zaele inquired with desperate hope.

"That I do not know. I do not know that to be saved is in his plan. But this I will do. I will try to bear to him your message, for which I am deeply grateful."

Zaele nodded her head in humble acknowledgment.

Mary took her hand. "And Zaele," she added tenderly, "let this deed performed by you in behalf of me and the protection of Jesus free you forever of self-condemnation." Mary looked deep into her eyes and repeated: "This you must do, beloved one, for it is just as unholy not to forgive ourselves as it is not to forgive others."

CHAPTER 22

AS SOON AS Zaele had gone, Mary hastened forth in search of Jesus that she might warn him of the conspiracy planned in the palace of Caiaphas. In the outer court of the Temple she found him, and around him were gathered a multitude listening to his words. Unable to reach him, she stood at the outer fringe anxiously seeking an opportunity to draw his attention.

It was apparent to Mary that the plot of the priests and Pharisees was already in motion. From different quarters of the throng came questions. Though pious were the words and innocent their tone, if Jesus had given their implied answer he would have been ensnared into displeasing either the Roman officials or the leaders of the Synagogue.

A Pharisee stood forth and asked: "Why do your disciples observe not the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?"

Calmly Jesus answered: "You lay aside the commandments given us by God and attempt to impress the people by making much of laws which have only you for their authority!"

Then Jesus turned to the people and said: "Hearken unto me, every one of you. There is naught from without a man that entering into him through his mouth can defile his soul, because it touches his belly, not his heart. But that which comes out of his mouth,

from the nature of his heart, and expresses itself in words—therein lies the power of man to defile himself!”

Then another man with a pretense of guileless mien said: “Master, we know you teach the way of God and truth, caring not for the person of men. Tell us, therefore, is it lawful or not to pay tribute to Caesar?”

Mary’s heart squeezed with concern. This was the question reported by Zaele with which they hoped to entangle him with the Roman law. Breathlessly she awaited Jesus’ reply.

“Why tempt me, you hyopcrite?” Jesus said without ire, and holding forth his hand demanded, “Show me the tribute money.”

A coin was handed to him. Holding it aloft he asked, “Whose image and superscription is stamped hereon?”

“Caesar’s,” was the answer.

And Jesus said, “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.”

His answer was beyond the understanding of some who had been hired to shout “treason” at this point—so shout they did. Since obviously false was their accusation of treason, only a mild stir of uncertainty was the result.

Jesus aware of the plot, raised his voice and said: “Woe unto you, you scribes and Pharisees. God has sent again and again to you His prophets, His seers, His wise and holy men, and you scourge them in your synagogues, stone them in the streets, and nail them to

crosses. Woe unto you, for on your head will come the blood of all the holy men who have been slain, from righteous Abel down to Zacharias, son of Barachias, whom you slew within the Holy Place before the very altar of the Lord!"

He looked about, lifting his arms, and spoke in a voice deeply saddened.

"Jerusalem! You cruel city of Jerusalem! You slay the prophets in the streets and kill the holy men sent to save you from yourselves. Often would I have gathered you as children to the fold of God, but you would have it not. You reject your God, and now your house shall be desolate, your temple destroyed and your people scattered throughout the world."

Jesus stepped down and was gone. Mary knew she needed not to warn him, for he knew of the conspiracy in the minds and hearts of his enemies. She returned home and locked herself within her chamber. Even though she reclined upon her bed, the beat of her heart continued to be rapid. The sadness she had read in Jesus' face remained before her eyes and sickened her with care.

Even though long ago Mary had ceased to think of Jesus as her son, but revered him as her lord and master, the sadness she sensed in him brought to life every instinct of motherhood. She ached to comfort him, to minister to him in this his hour of need.

Through the night she wept into a pillow clutched hard to her empty, aching breast; a breast which reached across time to the nights when she held close

to it the warm, golden head of her wondrously splendid son.

Now he stood alone facing the cruelest of deaths at the hands of the men of his homeland. He had been the most honored of all men in the other lands. Aziel had written to her this truth. But he had chosen to leave the lands that had honored him in order to bring to the people of his own land the blessings which were his to give.

A soft knock came upon Mary's door. Mary was alarmed for it was not yet dawn.

"Who is there?" she asked.

"It is I, Elizabeth. I dreamed you were sad and did weep. And I would comfort you."

The friendliness of Elizabeth's familiar voice was a welcome sound and penetrated the unreality of Mary's vigil. She lighted a lamp and admitted Elizabeth. In the soft lamplight they sat at the table.

"The crow of the cock awakened me," Elizabeth explained, "and for the first time in ever so long I felt that Peter had need of me. Then I remembered my dream concerning you, and I could not further rest until I had seen you. Were you awake?"

"Yes," Mary replied, "you dreamed the truth. I have wept the night. Yesterday I saw Jesus, and the sadness in his eyes has sickened me."

For a while their gaze was locked across the table, the flickering light falsely animating their pale, still faces.

Fearfully Mary whispered, "Could it be that he has failed in that which he wished to do? Even in foreign

lands he was accepted as the Christ; but in this, his homeland, they accept him not and plan his death."

Elizabeth lowered her gaze. She could not bear the anguish in Mary's eyes.

Framed in the window appeared a square of zodiacal light heralding the approach of dawn. Mary turned and stared at this sign of an awakening world.

"What deeds of men will this day bear?" she murmured. And then she thought of the sun. Could the sadness in Jesus' eyes come from the fact that the death he faced meant the end of his life? Leaving his work unfinished? Mary shuddered. Elizabeth arose and placed about her shoulders a shawl, then sat at her side comfortingly holding her hand.

"Elizabeth," Mary said, "there is something of which, on this day, at this moment, I must speak. Perhaps I should have spoken of it to another Elizabeth, the wisest, noblest and gentlest of all women, a holy woman, mother of John the harbinger, my cousin and friend. If to her I should have told these things, then by telling you, another Elizabeth, perhaps in a small measure it will suffice."

Elizabeth pressed her hand with affectionate encouragement.

"On the day of my betrothal," Mary began, "a voice from the Sun told me that the infant I was to bear would not only be the promised Messiah, king of the Jews, but would also demonstrate to man his dominion over death. The time has come," Mary continued, "when we shall know if this child I bore, this

Jesus man, this Christ made flesh, shall also have attained dominion over death."

Mary trembled again. When again she spoke her voice grew very meek.

"Now that the time is here, I find I cannot bear alone the weight of my secret. Will you share with me its significance?"

"No greater honor was ever bestowed," Elizabeth answered. And then captivated by the wonder of it all, she repeated to herself, "*Dominion over death! Dominion over death!*"

Suddenly a loud hammering on the gate of the outer court broke in on the stillness of dawn. Fearfully the two women stared at each other.

"It has begun," Mary said, and quickly led the way to the gate. They reached it before any of the household was aroused, and threw it open. There stood Peter. Never had Mary seen a more dejected figure. His huge frame was stooped, his massive head so bowed that his eyes stared at his feet.

Elizabeth clutched one of his arms and Mary the other, and they led him, stumbling, into the house. After a few steps Peter halted and dropping to his knees clasped Elizabeth tightly around the waist. Pressing his head hard against her body he wept as only a strong man can weep. Elizabeth buried her hands in his long, thick hair and drew him closer to her breast. Through Elizabeth's tears of pity for this man she loved shone purer joy than Mary had ever seen.

Mary remembered Elizabeth's dream. The crow of the cock had awakened her, and she had felt that for

the first time in ever so long Peter had need of her. If ever man sought solace from woman, Peter now needed that which Elizabeth could give to him.

Finally Peter began to mutter. "They have arrested the Master. They took him to the palace of Caiaphas. I followed. A maid I know admitted me and I watched with the servants." Again a spasm of weeping shook his powerful frame. Elizabeth held him close and patiently waited.

Mary watched Elizabeth. She felt that at this moment Elizabeth was repaid for all the loneliness of her love for Peter; and if she never saw him again the joy of this moment when he had such great need of her would so fill her heart that she would never again be lonely.

Slowly Peter raised his distorted face as though no longer could he hide his shame. His voice was more steady.

"While I was in the palace listening to the false charges being established, I was recognized. Three times I was accused of being a follower of Jesus."

Peter had to pause and swallow before he could utter:

"And three times I denied Him."

Peter's shame so returned at the sound of his own words that again he dropped his head, holding fast to Elizabeth's waist. But he wept no more.

Peter related to them how the twelve disciples and Jesus had withdrawn to their trysting place in the Garden of Gethsemane. As they sat down to eat, Jesus had said that one of them should betray him that same day.

Then Jesus had taken bread and blessed it, broke it, and gave it to each disciple, saying, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he had passed the cup, saying, "This is my blood which shall be shed for the many!"

Peter continued with difficulty. "Then Jesus said that this night we would be offended because of him; for it had been written, 'I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad.' Then the Master added, 'But after I am risen again I will appear before you in Galilee.' "

Peter's voice almost failed him when he said: "I answered that though all men be offended because of him, I would not. And the Master answered that before the cock crows I would deny him thrice—and I did."

For a while Peter could not speak. Mary and Elizabeth patiently waited. Mary was numb.

Peter spoke again. "Jesus went away to pray alone, bidding us remain awake until he returned. But after a while we slept. And while we slept the Jewish soldiers came. They knew not which among us was the Master until Judas betrayed him with a kiss."

For a time Mary, Elizabeth and Peter were stilled, absorbed in thought of that which Peter had related.

Then Mary stirred, saying, "Let us go forth and learn what has befallen him."

The three went forth while it was still the third hour to find out what had happened since Peter had departed. At the palace of Caiaphas they learned that Jesus had been taken to the Roman governor, Pontius

Pilate. Solemnly the three made their way to Pilate's palace.

While waiting at the outside gate they overheard soldiers laughing among themselves as they described how they had handled Jesus. They had stripped him and put on him a scarlet robe. Then one had plaited a crown of thorns which he dug into Jesus' brow. Another placed in his hand a broken reed, while all bowed their knee, mocking him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"

One of the soldiers was young. Beneath his helmet were sensitive features and delicately curved eyebrows. Raising his voice in an uncertain tone he stated: "Pontius Pilate believed this man. He would not judge him, and washed his hands of his death—and I am of the same opinion!"

The other soldiers, hardened to the twists and turns of life and death, would have ridiculed their young companion, but at that instant the gate opened. And with it the throats of the incited people, yelling for the blood of a condemned man.

The two women held fast to Peter's arms, for sight of Jesus was difficult to endure. His strength was so spent he could hardly stand.

The motherhood in Mary's heart cried out with such anguish that she was blind with pain.

One among the soldiers commissioned to crucify him paused and looked about. "Who shall carry his cross?" he cried.

Straight forth stepped a man who said, "I would bear his cross!"

"Who are you?" demanded the soldier.

"Simon of Cyrene," answered the man.

The soldier assigned to Simon the cross.

Mary was amazed at what she saw. This man who said he was Simon of Cyrene was none other than John the harbinger. Never could she have mistaken his splendid body and magnificent head of hair. She was so near she heard John's voice when he said, "Permit me, Master. It is long I have awaited this honor."

And Jesus, turning his bloody head toward John, replied with shining eyes, "It is fitting that he who prepared my way should bear the cross, my instrument of fulfillment. Beloved John, conqueror of the temple of man, it is now that your strength makes easier for me the drinking of my cup."

Dazedly, Mary, with Elizabeth and Peter, were pushed along with the throngs of people so impassioned with their zest for cruelty. The throngs pressed in from all sides. Suddenly Mary felt a firm clasp upon her arm. Turning she recognized the ancient figure of Arioeh, head of the Shepherd Tribe and one of the three to whom an angel appeared when Jesus was born.

"I would speak with you!" Arioeh shouted above the din of the mob.

Nodding, Mary indicated the outer edge of the crowd and the four made their way across the surging stream of people.

Behind a secluded wall Arioeh spoke: "For many generations we, the shepherds, awaited the birth of this Jesus, son of David, the king of our Shepherd Tribe.

"For days we have watched the progress of this plot to destroy him. At this moment just outside the city's walls are a thousand shepherds who wait for but a word from you, his royal mother, to enter the city, rescue our Master from these soldiers, and forever keep him safely in our hills!"

Motherhood surged through Mary. She could think of naught but her son; beaten, bleeding, brutally driven to his crucifixion. Without hesitation she spoke, "Let us go at once and give the word for which they wait!"

When Mary arrived beyond the gate there were shepherds as far as her eye could see. Each held in his hand some form of weapon.

Arioch lifted her upon the back of a camel so she might be seen of all. But before Mary could speak there came a strange light and a voice spoke. The voice of Jesus. The voice from the Sun! Mary knew it was heard by all, for a thousand faces turned heavenward as one and stared at a gleaming cross shining before the sun. The words came calm and clear:

"That which you would do for me I could also do. If I wished it so, from my Father-God would come legion upon legion of His mighty angels.

"Fear not for my life. Man can do me no harm. My body is resurrected now even before it is crucified, else I would be unable to resurrect it after it be crucified.

"I was resurrected when I became the Christ, overcoming my lower nature where anger, greed and pride abide. I was then reborn from above . . . and all who do as I have done will likewise be born again.

"Suffer me to drink this cup, to spill my blood. For only in my resurrected body can my earthly mission be fulfilled. Then will I have demonstrated to man his dominion over death. For what I do all men can do!"

The voice ceased, and the lighted cross was no more.

From the thousand shepherds there came not a sound. Mary held forth her hands to Arioeh to be assisted from the camel. Her motherly anxiety for Jesus was no more. Once again he was her Lord. Motherhood remained, but it was a universal motherhood for all men and women as they walked the path toward this resurrection of which Jesus had just spoken.

Without a backward glance at the awed shepherds she hurried toward Golgotha, hill of crucifixion, followed by Peter and Elizabeth.

When they arrived Jesus was already nailed to the cross. It stood between two other crosses upon which two thieves were tied. At his feet the soldiers were casting lots for his robe and other garments.

Mary, Peter and Elizabeth made their way as close as possible, as though by their nearness they might lend him strength.

Mary saw him raise his pain-racked eyes to heaven and heard again his wondrously beautiful voice:

"My Father-God, forgive these men; they know not what they do."

And then there arrived a tablet which Pontius Pilate had prepared, which read: "Jesus the Christ, King of the Jews."

When this was placed upon the cross the watching

priests were angered, and sent word to Pilate asking that he change it to read: "He claims to be the Christ." But Pilate's answer was: "It shall stand as it is written."

At the sixth hour, when the sun was at its height, the day became as dark as night, and from many throats came cries of fear. Above them all Mary heard the voice of Jesus.

"My God! My God! For this have I been kept!"

His words were not comprehended by some of the people. She understood their confusion but in her heart was naught but certainty. The words she had just heard come from her dying son meant that his life had been preserved and designed for this very moment. Were not his words an expression of fulfillment! Fulfillment of the purpose of his life!

Mary struggled to bring this wondrous truth to her heart in spite of the anguish at what she saw. Then as though in confirmation of this fulfillment she struggled to comprehend she heard his voice come loud and clear:

"It is finished!"

Through the eerie semi-darkness shone a golden light upon the now lifeless head of the Master. Though beneath her feet the earth shook, in Mary's heart settled a great relief.

The earth rocked to and fro and the hills were torn. And as the temple quivered the holy veil which Mary's hands had helped to weave was rent in twain. From Calvary the people fled in fear.

Not until Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea arrived with permission from Pilate to take the body of

Jesus and lay it into a tomb did Mary, Elizabeth and Peter depart. Silently they walked in an unreal world. People ran back and forth frantically shouting the names of those lost in the confusion.

At Mary's house Peter paused and turned to her. "The Master said he would appear to me in Galilee. I shall go there at once and wait."

He turned to Elizabeth, an unspoken question in his eyes. Elizabeth nodded her head and took his arm saying, "I would gladly go."

The three stared at each other, a common question in their eyes. Then Peter and Elizabeth moved away. After a few steps Peter stopped, and leaving Elizabeth returned to Mary. With tear-filled eyes and husky voice he asked from a desperate heart, "Will I not see my Master again?"

"You will see him," Mary heard herself answer.

Peter, faint hope struggling in his face, turned and was gone.

* * * *

When it was yet dark on the first day of the week while Mary lay awake in her bed listening to the hopes and fears of her heart, there came excited shouts from the street. Could something have happened at the tomb? Quickly she arose, dressed and rushed outside.

From a passerby, she learned that the stone was rolled away and the body had been taken. "He has risen!" her heart began to sing. And then doubts assailed her. "What if his body had been stolen?"

In the darkness before dawn she blindly walked the streets of Jerusalem, unconscious of all save the fears

within her heart. As the blackness began to turn blue over the Mount of Olives she realized she had left the city and was standing in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Turning, she glanced across the Kedron Gorge over the city's walls, and up to the huge shadow which was the Temple. Her thoughts flew back to the mornings when she had stood with her back against a column waiting for the rising sun. She remembered how the fears which she had brought to the Sun were always dispelled by the time its light had lifted the night's shadowy covers from the Garden of Gethsemane.

The Temple's dome now become aglow. The sun was peeping over the mount, its light creeping down the slope toward the garden where Mary stood.

"Are you wondering, little Mother, if again your fears will be dispelled when the light of the morning sun reaches Gethsemane?"

Mary turned and her eyes were filled with the glory of the risen Lord; in her ears was the beauty of his wondrous voice.

"Just as I removed your fears in those days, do I now remove them again. It was I who spoke to you from the sun when you were but an infant. It was I who prepared you for the life you have lived. I had need of a pure body that I might be born, live and die as a man. Only by leading could I show the way to everlasting life.

"Through the ages you shall be known as Mother of God. To you will man bring the hungers and fears of his heart. And throughout those ages, little Mother, you and I will work hand in hand."

He was gone as he had come. Stunned with the glory of it, Mary stared at her feet. Gradually she realized she was looking at a rose of Sharon. Dewdrops clung to its velvety petals and sparkled like precious gems in the new sunlight. Again the sun's rays had reached the Garden of Gethsemane. But this time she knew her fears would never return. Her risen Lord had borne them away forever.

She didn't remember how she returned home, but once there she felt she must at once see Elizabeth and Peter. She must tell them of the risen Lord!

* * * *

She found Elizabeth and Peter standing on the pink-shelled shore of the sea of Galilee. Mary sensed that she had arrived upon a scene of tense drama. In Peter's eyes burned the light of holy zeal, while in Elizabeth's glowed the light of unselfish love.

Peter was a different man. Now he was truly the rock Jesus had called him. With a poise supported by an inner certainty he related to Mary what had happened.

"Remember that it was three times I denied the Lord in the palace of Caiaphas?" he asked.

Mary nodded her head and Peter continued.

"Yesterday morning after we had fished the night for naught, a man from upon the shore called forth that we should again cast the net upon the right side of the boat. Just to please him we did, and so filled it was with fish we could hardly draw it in. When we came at last to shore we saw that the man was our Lord, now come to Galilee as he had promised.

"After we had dined he turned to me and said, 'Simon, son of Jonas, love you me?' "

Peter was forced to pause, and Mary knew why; for she too felt within her heart the same exquisite wonder. Then he continued.

"Three times he asked me that question; the number of times I denied him. Each time I answered that he knew my heart and how great was my love. And each time I answered he said to me, 'Feed my sheep. Go into all the world and feed my sheep the truth of my life. Tell them that what I have done, they can do also!' "

Again Peter was forced to pause. This time Elizabeth finished for him, her voice warm and vibrant with pride and joy.

"And today he leaves to go forth into the world to feed the sheep of his Lord!"

Hand in hand Mary and Elizabeth stood beside the green waters of the Galilee and watched the departing figure of Peter. From Elizabeth trembled a deep sigh. Mary pressed her hand with understanding and said:

"Every woman is a Mary or an Elizabeth; a mother, a wife, a loved one. And always when their man answers the call from on high the Marys and Elizabeths must see him go—even as you and I."

Mary watched the bright sunlight reflecting as a halo from Peter's gleaming hair. She lifted her face to the sun and the new born day and as she did the voice she loved so well spoke once more into her listening heart:

"Yes, blessed mother, Peter goes forth to waft to

the world perfume from the flower of your womb. That rarest of all fragrances — the Truth behind why each day and each year I die and am born again.

“And I shall continue to shine upon the heads and hearts of those such as Peter until this truth of the risen Christ, born of one blessed among women, is carried to the darkest corners of your earth and every man has come to *know* that the death he fears does not exist!”

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